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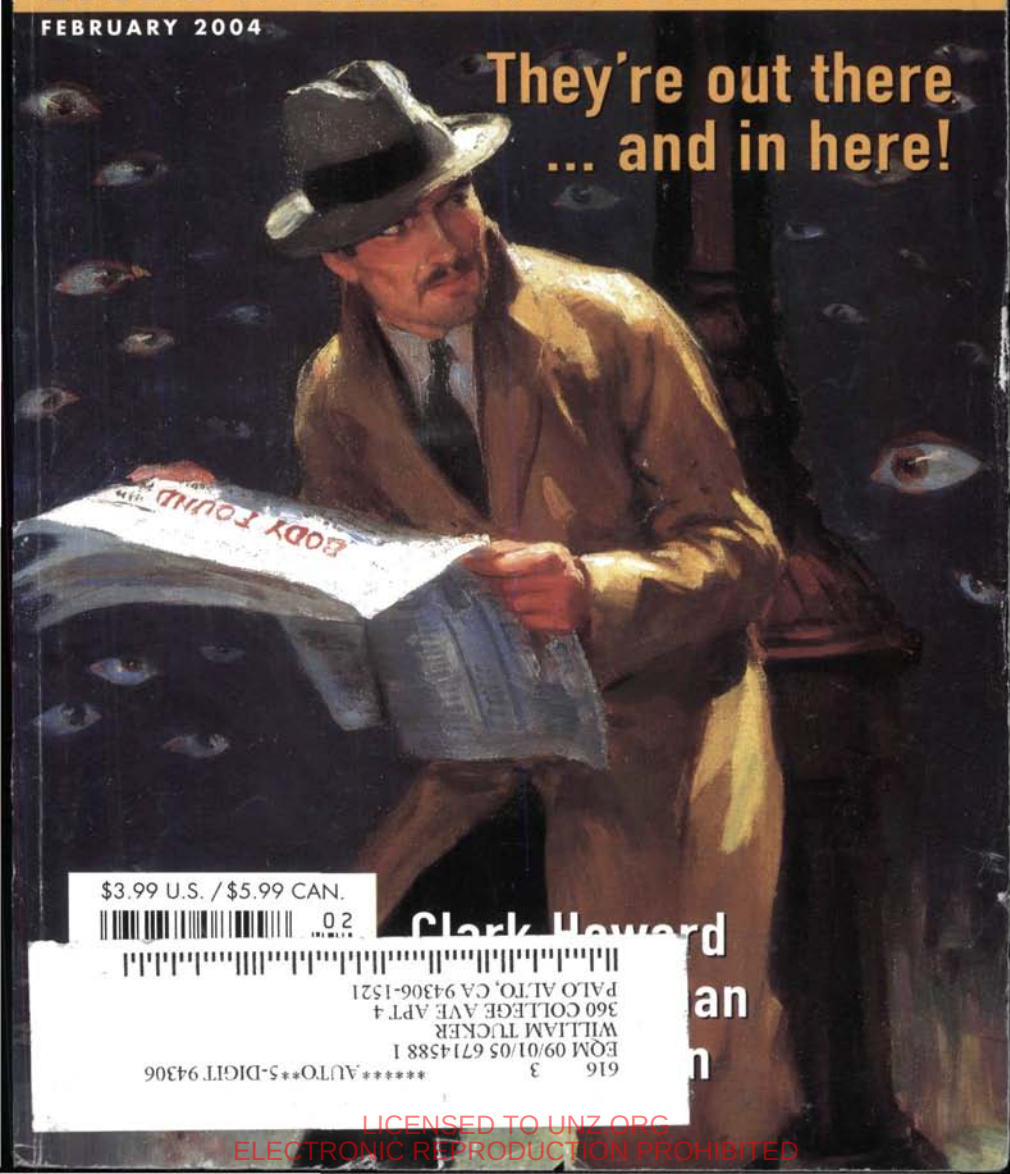

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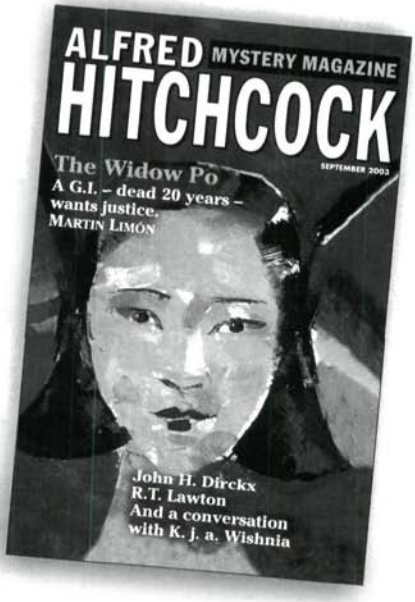

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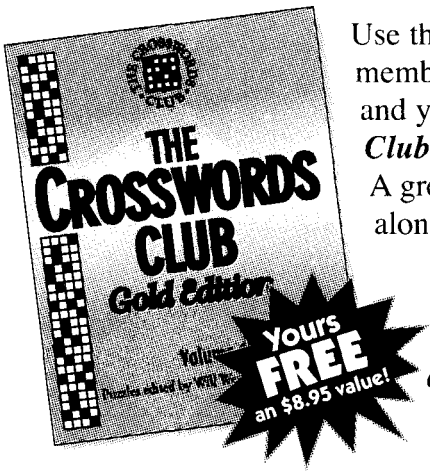

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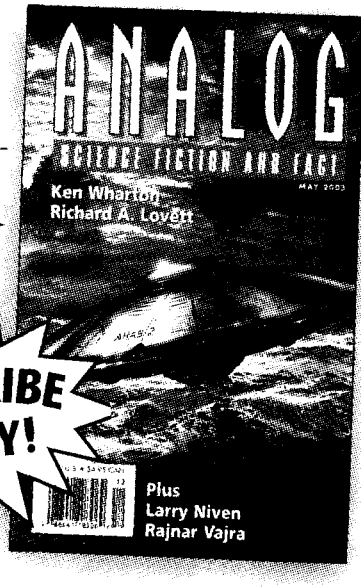

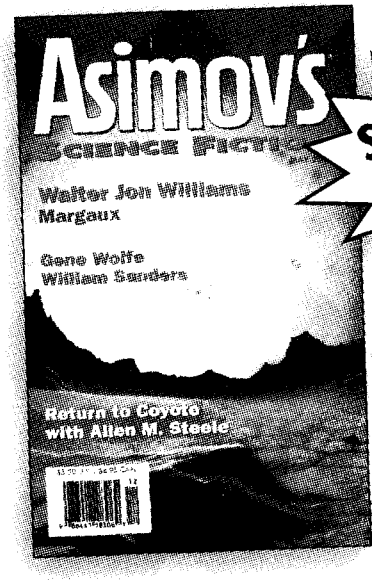

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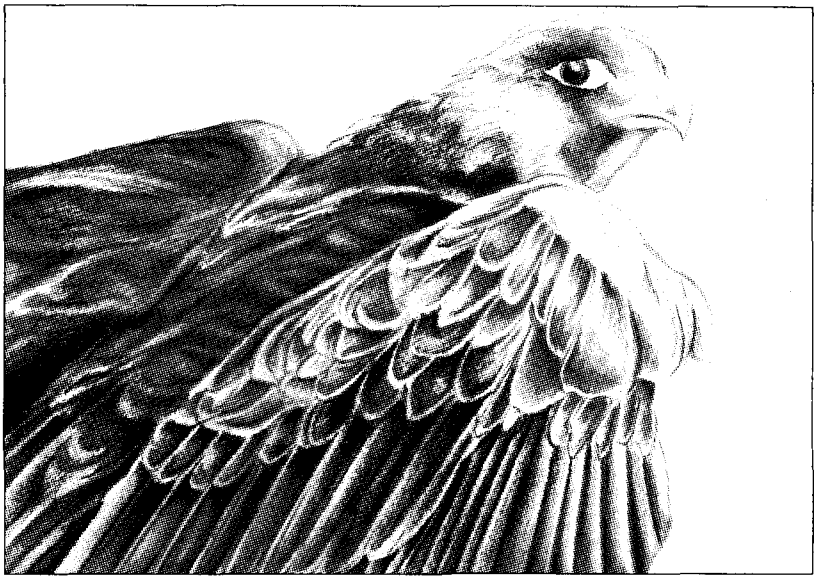

Art by June Levine

RAPTORS

by Clark Howard

Whenever Charles thought back on the night he met Laura Dade, the memory was in soft focus, with feathery edges. Not like a memory at all, but more like part of an old movie in black and white, on a television set that was losing its picture tube. He wondered if, because of what he helped her do, his mind might be trying to erase the memory, and with it the guilt, so he would believe it had not happened at all, that it had not been real.

But he knew that such thoughts were irrational, senseless, really. There was no way to expunge what had happened. It was *real.*

Too real. . . .

©2003 by Clark Howard

It had been at the cocktail party prior to a fund-raising dinner for the Chicago chapter of PAWS—the Preservation of All Wildlife Society. Selina Dalbro, the North Shore socialite hostess, always introduced him by saying, ". . . and this is our bird man, Charles Kirkendall. He's not the one from Alcatraz, of course; that one worked with sparrows. This one devotes himself exclusively to raptors."

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Invariably someone in the group would frown and ask, "What are raptors?"

Charles would smile, tolerantly but cordially, and reply, "Eagles, hawks, falcons." As he was speaking, dear Selina Dalbro would be easing away from the group, leaving him at the mercy of the same curious questions he had answered at dozens of other fund-raising events.

On this particular night, a little while later, he himself had broken away from the group and gone to the bar for a fresh drink, and that was when he became aware of Laura Dade beside him.

"Why are they called 'raptors'?" she asked without preliminary.

"Because they're birds of prey," he said. "The word raptor comes from the Latin word 'rapere.' It means 'to seize.' Raptors seize their prey, then carry it off to kill, if they can. If the prey is too large to carry off, the raptor will kill it and eat it on the spot."

"How interesting. Exactly what do you do with these raptors?"

"Study them. Train them."

"Train them to do what?"

"Hunt, mostly. Some to race."

Charles studied her. Straight black hair. Tall. A little too thin for his taste. Angular where curves should have been. Dark eyes deep with curiosity. Cheekbones so firm they looked as if they had been cast in a mold. Lips designed for promises made in whispers, in the dark.

"Where do you do all this?" she asked. "Surely not here in the city."

"Hardly. I have a grant to use part of Deer Grove, a forest preserve out in the northwest corner of the county."

"Do you and your staff live out there?"

"I have no staff. I work alone and live alone. Raptors don't like a lot of people around."

"But what about cooking, cleaning—?"

"I do everything myself. There's not that much, actually."

"Do you get into the city often?"

Charles smiled wryly. "Only when Selina throws one of her benefit dinners—and then under duress."

She raised an eyebrow. "What kind of duress?"

A nominee for the 2003 Anthony Award for Best Short Story (for "To Live and Die in Midland, Texas" *EQMM* 9-10/02), Clark Howard is a writer with great scope in the subjects, settings, and types of characters he chooses. And whether he's writing about prisoners in a state pen, jazz musicians in New Orleans, or high society in his hometown, Chicago, he seems to have an unfailing knack for hooking, and holding, his readers. ¶

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"It has to do with funding." He glanced at her neck, her throat, the prominence of her clavicle. When she caught him looking, he quickly said, "You haven't told me your name."

"Laura Dade, Mr. Kirkendall." Her left hand was on the bar, casually around the stem of a martini glass. Charles lightly touched the diamond-encrusted wedding set she wore. "Mrs. Laura Dade," he said.

"Yes. My husband is Warren Dade. He's a partner in a brokerage firm. You might like him; he's an outdoor type."

"Is he here tonight?"

"No. Actually, he's out of town. On second thought, you might *not* like him. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but he's down in Arkansas, duck hunting. I don't imagine you approve of that."

"No," Charles replied, but without rancor. "I don't believe in killing living creatures for sport."

Laura Dade sipped from her glass, then asked casually, "Did you know Selina's late husband, Martin Dalbro?"

"No. I applied for my grant after his death. I understand it was some kind of boating accident."

"Yes. My husband Warren and I were with them at the time. Martin was an outdoorsman, too; he and Warren were great friends. We were on Warren's boat out on Lake Michigan, sport fishing. Somehow he fell overboard. He drowned."

"Wasn't anyone able to help him?"

"No. Selina was down below, fixing sandwiches. Warren was forward in the cabin at the wheel. I was lying on top of the cabin, sunbathing. Martin must have fallen off the stern. No one even heard him cry for help. The boat was cruising outbound at a pretty good speed. When we finally missed Martin, we went back at once to search for him and radioed the Lake Patrol. But it was too late. His body was never recovered."

"Tragic," said Charles.

"Yes. Selina was devastated. Of course, she inherited millions. During her bereavement, she decided to use some of the money to help preserve wildlife. People said she did it to try and make up for the bloodshed among animals that Martin, Warren, and so many of their sportsmen friends had caused. I mean, there was nothing they wouldn't kill: fish, fowl, wild animals—" Laura Dade paused and sipped from her martini again. "I really don't know why I'm telling you all this."

Charles patted her free hand lightly. "Don't worry. I won't tell anyone that you're a cocktail-hour gossip. Your secret is safe with me."

Other people joined them then, and gradually they drifted apart and did not see each other again to speak for the rest of the evening. Later, at the dinner, they locked eyes once across the room. On the way home, Charles thought about her. All the way

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back to his compound in the forest preserve, he thought about her. He went to sleep that night thinking about her.

And awoke thinking about her the next morning.

Three days later, Charles saw a late-model BMW come up the private road to the compound and Laura Dade got out. Wearing fitted black leather pants and a tight sweater, she looked even thinner than he remembered.

Seeing Charles outside the aviary next to his bungalow, she came over. "Hello," she said.

"Hello."

"I asked Selina how to get here. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not. I'm glad you came. I've been thinking about you."

"I've been thinking about you, too. Odd, isn't it?" She looked down at a young bird he had nesting in the crook of his left arm while he lightly stroked the base of its head with one finger of his right hand. "Is that one of your raptors?"

"Yes. This is Taza, a tercel—that's a male falcon. He's just been taken from his mother and I'm giving him some quality time to make him feel secure again." He did not offer to let her stroke the bird, even though it would have given him an excuse to step closer to her. Restless urges were stirring inside him. "Would you like to see the other birds?"

"Yes, very much."

The inside of the aviary was compartmentalized by chicken wire into large ground-to-roof cages, each containing feeding boards, swings, setting shelves, and a coop onto which its occupant could retreat for darkness and privacy. There were, in addition to the falcons, hawks, small eagles, and owls. "They all seem so different," Laura said, looking around.

"They are," said Charles. "Different species. But they have one thing in common: All of them are killers by instinct. All of them can be trained by man to kill selected quarry." He named each of them as they went. "This is Cochise, the father of the tercel I'm holding. And over here, this peregrine is Jezebel, its mother."

"Peregrine?"

"Yes, they're the type of falcon traditionally used in falconry."

Laura stared at Jezebel's blue-gray body perched on one of the shelves, her long, pointed wings hunched up like shoulders around her black head. "She's so much larger than the male."

"Female falcons are always larger than tercels. This species of bird," he said, a note of pride slipping into his tone, "is the most perfect killer bird in existence. It has all the most desirable qualities: incredible strength, a natural, inherent fierceness, awesome

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speed. A peregrine can power-dive two hundred miles an hour; it's the fastest living creature in existence—"

As Charles was speaking, Jezebel suddenly swooped forward off the shelf and landed on the chicken wire directly at Laura Dade's face, causing her to step back, startled. Jezebel stared at her with large black eyes, spreading the plumage of her shiny, fanlike wings.

"I think Jezebel wants her baby back," Laura said.

Charles shook his head. "No, she's not interested in Taza anymore. She's interested in you. She's jealous."

"You're not serious?"

"Yes, I am. Peregrines are very territorial. She's never seen me with a woman before. Except for Selina and her funding tours, that is. Groups of women aren't threatening."

"But I am?"

"Yes. You're very threatening."

Charles put Taza in a smaller cage off in a corner and took Laura over to his bungalow. It was modest, at best: a small living room, bedroom, and bath off to one side, kitchen off to the other; but it had a nice screened-in patio at the rear, facing the forest, and it was there they retreated for coffee and what was left of a box of shortbread cookies.

"Do you like this sort of solitary life?" she asked him.

"Actually, yes," Charles said. "I grew up in an orphanage at the edge of the Sasabe Desert in Arizona. I was always pretty much of a loner; I spent a lot of time playing in the scrubland behind the orphanage. That's where I first began to love birds."

"You have no family?"

"Just what's out in the aviary." Charles glanced down at his coffee. "Is your husband back from his duck killing?"

"Yes. He's already planning another trip. Canada this time. For moose."

"Do you ever go with him?"

"Never. Selina would never forgive me. The closest either of us ever came to the outdoor life was fishing off Warren's boat. Somehow it seemed different to kill fish. I'm not sure why."

"It may be because they occupy a different environment than ours. They live in the sea; everything else we kill shares our own environment: earth and sky."

"Yes, I suppose."

When she said it was time for her to go, Charles walked her back out to the BMW. On the way, she happened to see, in a flat clearing, what looked like a display-window mannequin fixed like a scarecrow of sorts: a wooden upright supporting it, braces holding its wooden arms and legs, a lifelike head and face, the whole thing adorned in camouflage clothing. "Is that to keep the other

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birds away?" she asked.

"No, that's a training dummy," Charles explained. "I'm training Jezebel to attack humans."

"What on earth for?"

"The Congo government wants to try using raptors to combat elephant poachers who are decimating their endangered herds in the Katanga elephant refuge. Jezebel is our guinea pig in the study, to see if it's a feasible idea."

"Do you think it will work?"

"I think it has a good chance of success, yes."

She looked at him curiously. "It doesn't bother you? Training birds to attack humans?"

"Not when those humans are animal killers." He said it without feeling, as if he might be telling her what time it was. Then he added, "Listen, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell anyone about this experiment. No one else knows about it except Selina. Some people might not understand our rationale; it might affect contributions, funding."

"Don't worry," she said, with just the hint of a smile, "I won't tell anyone that you're an aviary gossip. Your secret is safe with me."

When they got to her car and he held the door open for her, she suddenly said, "Charles," calling him by name for the first time, "will you let me come out and watch you train Jezebel?"

"I don't—know," he said hesitantly. "I'm not sure how she would react to your being around. . . ."

"Can we try? Please . . ." She put a hand on his arm. "I promise I'll leave quietly if it doesn't work out. Please, Charles—"

"Sure, I guess," he finally conceded. "We'll try it."

Watching the BMW move down the private road out of the compound, Charles had a peculiar feeling that he had made a major mistake. At the same time, there was already a growing anticipation at the thought of seeing Laura Dade again.

The first time Charles allowed Laura to participate in Jezebel's training, he patiently walked her through the entire routine.

"First, the leather glove and padded leather forearm guard," he said as he donned the protective gear and secured it in place with Velcro fasteners. "Even after a raptor becomes well acquainted with you and trusts you, and you trust it, this protection is still essential. The talons of a raptor, particularly a peregrine, are razor-sharp, and even though the bird might not intentionally harm its trainer, some sudden outside noise or movement might startle it and cause it to tense reflexively a split second. In that split second, a talon could slice your arm open to the bone."

Laura, this day in jeans and sweatshirt, watched, fascinated, as Charles opened the wire door to Jezebel's compartment and

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leaned his left shoulder and arm inside. Jezebel at once abandoned the shelf on which she was resting and swooped over to perch on his protected forearm. Charles drew a soft leather hood from under his belt and looped it expertly over the peregrine's head and eyes, fastening it under her beak at the neck.

"This," he explained, "is called a 'rufter.' It makes the raptor feel safe and secure; her only contact when she's hooded is by the talons around my arm—that and my voice." With the hood in place, Charles loosely tied leather thongs around both of Jezebel's legs. "These are 'jesses.' They're so she won't fly until I want her to."

Charles began to speak to Jezebel in a soft, cooing voice, like a mother with her first newborn. At the same time, he used a forefinger to lightly stroke the peregrine's plumage.

"She doesn't seem to mind my presence," Laura suggested.

"That's because she's still in the aviary," Charles told her. "This is her own environment and she knows that you're just a visitor. Outside, she'll be in *your* environment: earthbound, which is foreign to her. When I take off the rufter and she identifies you with the sound of your voice, then she might feel threatened. But I can control her." Charles touched Laura's arm. "Don't worry."

"I won't." Their eyes met and held. "I trust you."

They went outside and Charles bent to pick up a plastic baggie with something bloody in it. "Calf's liver," he said. "I cut it into thin strips earlier. It's the closest thing to the bloody raw flesh that a raptor gets when it seizes live prey."

They walked across an area of dead, dry grass, the late morning sun warm on their shoulders. Jezebel perched as still as death on the raised, bent left arm that Charles kept parallel to his shoulders. As they approached the mannequin, Laura saw an old rifle on the ground next to it, its bolt and trigger housing missing.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"It's a prop. I want Jezebel to identify her human prey by their weapons. Elephant poachers have to carry high-powered rifles. Congolese conservation police carry only sidearms. Rifles are prohibited on the game preserves. I'm training Jezebel to attack any person carrying a rifle."

"Isn't there the chance of a mistake?"

Charles shrugged. "I don't see how. There's only one reason a person carries a rifle in a game preserve."

When they reached the mannequin in the center of the clearing, Charles opened the baggie with his teeth and set it on the ground. With the fingers of his free hand, he fished out several four-inch strips of bloody calf's liver and laid them on each side of the mannequin's neck, which Laura Dade now saw was made of some variety of very hard wood. On both sides of the wooden neck and at its throat, there were deep, crisscrossed cuts, as if the mannequin had

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been slashed with a saber.

"Talon scars," Charles said, interpreting her stare. "All from Jezebel. Imagine if it had been a human."

"Yes," Laura said quietly. "Imagine."

When he was ready, Charles backed off a few feet from the mannequin and deftly unfastened the rufter and unhooded the peregrine. Jezebel remained perched, her body very still, only her head moving in a sweep from side to side as her large black eyes surveyed first the two humans near her, then the terrain around them, then the humans again. Charles was given a cursory look, Laura a more thoughtful one. Charles was poised with the rufter, ready to loop it back in place if Jezebel showed any sign of aggression toward Laura. But the peregrine was undisturbed by her presence. The only impatience Jezebel displayed was fussy movement of her sinewy black legs and white, deadly talons.

"She's anxious to fly," Charles said. "And she sees the liver."

"I'm okay with her, I guess."

"Yes, you're okay with her."

He untied the jesses and freed Jezebel's legs. Then he raised his left forearm up to ear level—and in a soft puff of air the peregrine's wings spread and she was airborne. Laura drew in her breath at the sight of it.

"Charles, she's—beautiful."

"Yes, she is." He took Laura's arm. "Come on, we have to move away from the prey. She won't strike if we're too close."

They retreated to the edge of the clearing, where the dried grass turned to green and where tamarack trees formed the edge of the forest preserve. They sat on a low knoll between two of the trees and watched the sky as Jezebel swooped and plunged and climbed in the air like a frolicking dolphin in a vast lagoon. As their heads turned in unison to watch the bird's movements, their shoulders touched lightly. Several times they glanced at each other, their eyes holding briefly as they shared the moment of natural beauty above them.

Then the natural beauty turned to natural savagery.

Jezebel banked to her left, wings wide at first, then gathered them close to her body and went into a dive that, had the two people on the ground not been tracking her, would have rendered her almost invisible against the far clouds behind her. Then, in mere seconds, she was close enough to the ground to again be easily seen. Her wings spread as she broke her dazzling plunge; her thin, powerful legs pushed out; the deadly, razorlike talons stretched apart like the killer claws they were, and in a split instant were on the back of the mannequin's head and neck, digging in and making new scars in the wood, while Jezebel's beak hungrily found the fresh strips of liver.

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At the edge of the clearing, Charles and Laura watched, he approvingly, she with a transfixed stare that held until the peregrine finished feeding and gracefully lifted herself back into the air.

"Where is she going?" Laura asked.

"Back to the aviary," Charles told her. "She'll fly around for a while first."

"Then we'll have time," said Laura.

She lay back on the grass and pulled Charles down on top of her, barely having time to part her lips before they were smothered by his.

Selina Dalbro drove out in her gleaming silver Bentley to see Charles a few days later. She was her usual chic self, decked out in Espada and Ferragamo, waving a check at him.

"Funding, funding, funding, Charles," she said jovially, presenting a cheek for him to kiss. "See what rewards are reaped when you come into the city and make nice with the rich folks?"

They sat on the little screened-in back patio where he and Laura Dade had sat that first day. The sight of Selina in the same rocker in which Laura had sat made Charles think of her, as did numerous other things since their initial intimacy: Her scent was on his bed linen, which he had not changed because of it; it was on a towel she had used after her shower, which he had not laundered; it was, he imagined, even on Jezebel when Charles held the peregrine close to his face.

"Laura told me she's been visiting you," Selina said without preliminary.

"Yes, she has," Charles responded, in what he hoped was not too casual a tone. "She seems interested in the raptors and my work with them."

"Hmm. I get the impression that she's interested in more than the raptors."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Charles. Is something going on between you two?"

"No, of course not. What on earth makes you think that?"

"I just know Laura, that's all," Selina said. She looked off at the forest behind them. "I know how vulnerable she is. And I know what she's gone through with that bastard she's married to." Looking back at Charles, she added, "Frankly, if she *was* becoming involved with you, I'd be happy for her. She deserves a decent man in her life."

"Why do you call her husband a bastard?" Charles asked.

"Because he is one." Selina almost spat the words out. "He's one of those virile, manly types who think women, particularly wives, are no more than property. He's crude, lewd, insensitive—"

"Also wealthy, I gather."

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"Oh yes, he's that, too. Why is it that the bastards of the world seem to make all the money, Charles?"

"I don't know that they do," Charles demurred. "You were married to a wealthy man; was he a bastard?"

"As a matter of fact, he was," Selina replied frankly. "Though not as much a bastard as Laura's husband is. Martin and Warren were business partners, you know. Senior partners in a brokerage house. Whenever a client lost a lot of money, they would actually laugh and joke about how much *they* made in commissions before the client went bankrupt. It was scandalous." She shook her head peevishly. "The people that some people marry."

"Maybe the money has something to do with it," Charles suggested, entirely without contempt.

"Undoubtedly. Both Laura and I came from upper middle-class families, so we weren't poor by any means; but neither of us had a clue about what *real* money was until we married our respective husbands. Any more than we had a clue about the character—or lack of it—of the men themselves. That's why I use so much of what I inherited from Martin for the Society; I want to help preserve some of the wildlife that he and Warren Dade slaughtered so promiscuously in the pursuit of manly sport." Selina shook her head again, perplexedly this time. "How on earth did we get on such an unpleasant subject?"

"I think it started with you hoping that Laura and I were becoming involved. Did she give you the impression that we were?"

"Not specifically," Selina admitted. "But I am older than her, you know, and much more—well, worldly. I just sensed something in the way she talked about you. There was a lilt in her voice, as if being with you made her happy."

"I think she enjoys being around the raptors," Charles said as neutrally as he could manage. "But if you think her visits are going to cause problems, I can discourage her from coming." It was the last thing in the world he intended to do, but he thought it sounded good.

"Heavens, no!" Selina objected. "Let the poor girl find a little happiness when and where she can. I just don't want to see her get hurt in any way."

"She'll never be hurt by me, Selina," Charles promised.

He had never meant anything more in his life.

In the beginning of their intimacy, when both Charles and Laura felt some degree of unfamiliarity and awkwardness, Laura would arrive at the compound unannounced, park in front of the little house, and go off in search of Charles. She would find him in or around the aviary, or out in the clearing somewhere training one of the raptors, or at times lying under a tree at the edge of the forest, playing with Taza, the baby, allowing the increasingly frisky

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tercel to hop about on his shoulders and chest, peck aggressively at the uncooperative buttons on his shirt, and flute its wings when Charles teased it with snapping fingers or a length of twine as if it were a kitten. These times, when Laura found him, she would join him in whatever he was doing, watching intently the interaction between the man and the birds, almost as an acolyte watches a master.

Eventually, Charles would complete or simply put aside whatever he was doing, and in unspoken agreement they would stroll over to the little house and go inside. There would be tentative touching, fleeting hugs, brief kissing as their hunger for each other heightened and they made their way into the bedroom and undressed.

As time passed and the unfamiliarity morphed into confidence, the awkwardness into proficiency, Laura simply parked, sounded the horn twice, and went into the house to wait for him. When he got to her, she was already undressed and in bed, sometimes with fresh fruit and Brie and glasses of wine already on a tray on the nightstand. Charles never knew when she would arrive, what she would bring, or how long she would stay. He only knew that she came.

Early one afternoon, Laura walked with Charles into the clearing. Jezebel was on his gloved wrist, her head held high under the soft leather hood.

"Charles?" she said. He glanced at her. There was a hesitancy in her voice.

"Yes?"

"Would you let me help with Jezebel?"

"Help how?"

"Put on her rufter. Bring her out of the aviary. Carry her out here on my arm. Release her to fly. Would you let me do those things?"

"Why, I—I don't know, Laura. No one has ever handled her but me. She's temperamental—"

"She doesn't resent me, Charles, you said so yourself. She lets me stroke her cowl. And you really wouldn't have to teach me much; I've observed you do it all so often that I'm sure I know how. Please, Charles, I *want* to do it."

Charles thought he detected some sort of desperation in her request, and wondered what was behind it. He wondered if perhaps she was developing guilty feelings about her adultery, maybe even feeling cheap driving all the way out from the city just for the purpose of sex. As to the former, he doubted it, since Selina had told him how crude and boorish Laura's husband was, how apparently insensitive to her emotional needs; but as to the latter, feeling common or tawdry about it—maybe there was something to that. He had, he recalled, detected a quiet moodiness in her on several occasions, as if she were troubled about something. When

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he asked her if anything was the matter, she had merely shrugged it off, claiming fatigue or a headache. It occurred to him now that Laura might be trying to fill a need of some kind, something to validate her reason for coming to him. One thing he knew for certain: He did not want her to *stop* coming.

"All right," he agreed at last, "if you're sure you want to try it. If she resists your attention, you know there's some risk involved—"

"I'm aware of that," she replied resolutely. "Charles, I really don't think she'll resist me."

"All right, then," he said, hugging her. "We'll give it a try."

They made love a second time that day, before she left late in the afternoon.

Laura was right, as it turned out. Jezebel did not resist her, not in the least, not for a moment. The ease of the transition surprised Charles. Peregrines were inherently jealous, inordinately territorial, acutely observant of threats—either real or imagined. So when Charles gloved Laura's hand and arm the next day and opened Jezebel's cage, he was amazed to see Jezebel come out and perch on Laura's arm as if it were the most natural thing in the world for both of them. Their eyes locked, Jezebel's large and black, like bullet holes, Laura's direct and teal, like Polynesian pools. The stare held steadily as Laura cooed softly to the bird, and with a move as smooth and expert as Charles himself had, drew the soft leather rufter over Jezebel's head, darkening the peregrine's world. Then she very efficiently looped the jesses around Jezebel's legs and held them in place with her gloved fingers.

"Incredible," Charles muttered to himself. It must, he decided as they walked outside, be some kind of female thing that he could not be expected to understand. Or explain.

Out in the clearing, when the fresh raw meat had been affixed to the neck and face of the training mannequin, and the disabled rifle laid in place across the wooden arms as a hunter might carry it, Charles said to Laura, "All right, this will be the real test: how she reacts when the hood is removed and she sees that she's outside with open space and sky all around her—and then you remove the jesses from her legs and she knows she's completely free. For the first time she can act with total impunity: do what she wants to do—tear your face off if she feels like it—and fly away free of punishment, never to return." He squeezed Laura's free arm. "This is the risk I spoke of. You don't have to continue. We can go back—"

But even as he spoke, Laura compressed her lips with determination and slipped off the rufter. Jezebel's wide eyes fixed on her, then glanced at Charles, then at the training dummy she had attacked so many times, then shifted quickly around the clearing at the forest

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surrounding them, the sky covering them. Laura heard a barely audible rolling gurgle emanating from the bird's throat.

"Yes, my baby," she cooed softly, as she unlooped the jesses, "It's time for you to fly. . . ."

Jesses off, Laura quickly raised her arm above her head and Jezebel spread her long, pointed wings and lifted off. Laura and Charles watched her ascend into her own domain.

"You did beautifully," Charles complimented her, slipping an arm around her waist.

"I did do all right, didn't I?" she agreed, pleased.

"Merely 'all right' is an understatement," he said. "It took me weeks to do as well when I was in training."

"Yes, but you didn't have the teacher I had," she said. Leaning over, she kissed him. "Let's go back to the house. We've got time."

Arm in arm, they walked off the clearing.

Over the next month, Laura worked with Jezebel a dozen times, which was as many days as she could risk coming out to the compound without her absences being too noticeable. Each session with the peregrine, like her intimacy with Charles, brought on more confidence and comfort in her being there and in what she was doing. Charles no longer noticed any moodiness; Laura became more cheerful, upbeat, sexually teasing him as she had never done before, playful in bed, more experimental.

She began to participate in all aspects of Jezebel's care and training: grooming her by brushing her with several pigeon feathers tied together like a duster; playing with her by dragging a set of jesses with tiny bells on them over the top and sides of her cage while Jezebel pranced around on the cage bars pecking at them; even buying and bringing out Jezebel's raw meat herself.

"Good lord, Laura, these are filets mignons," Charles exclaimed the first time she unwrapped a butcher's package.

"What's wrong with that?" she asked.

"Nothing's really wrong with it, but it's a needless expense. Chicken and calves' livers will do just as well."

"How do you know that, Charles? How do you know that she doesn't get tired of the same old menu all the time? I mean, suppose you had to eat a hot dog every day for lunch; don't you think you'd appreciate a nice Philly steak sandwich for a change? Of course you would. Anyway," she concluded as she began slicing the filets into strips, "nothing is too good for my baby bird."

Charles shook his head in mild amusement. Her baby bird. A fully mature peregrine falcon being trained to attack and possibly—probably—kill illegal poachers had now become Laura Dade's baby bird—and was being fed USDA prime cuts of meat that cost twenty-two dollars a pound.

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As she worked, he kissed her on the back of the neck, thinking how utterly unexciting his life had been before she came along.

Selina Dalbro visited him again one day, waving another funding check before her, driving a Bentley he had never seen before.

"New car?" Charles asked.

"Yes. I got tired of the silver. This one's teal blue." She winked at him. "Rather like Laura's eyes, don't you think?"

They retired to the back porch, for coffee now that the weather was becoming cool, and chocolate-covered graham crackers.

"So," Selina asked, as usual without preliminary, "how are you and young Mrs. Dade getting on?"

"Laura and I are getting on, as you put it, very well. She has developed a keen interest in my work and has become something of a now-and-then volunteer assistant to me. We've become quite good friends."

"Oh, come now, Charles." She looked askance at him. "Is that all? Really? Just 'quite good friends'?"

"Selina, what are you trying to do," Charles asked bluntly, "make something more than it is of my relationship with Laura? And if so, may I ask why?"

"Not at all," Selina protested. "I'm not trying to make anything of it that I don't already suspect it is. My main purpose in bringing the matter up is simply to caution you. Laura's husband, Warren, is not a man to be trifled with. If he thought for a moment that you had seduced his wife—his *property*—he might well come out here with one of his extensive collection of hunting rifles and blow your head off, then claim it was an accident. And with his money and influence, he'd likely get away with it." Selina hunched her shoulders and shuddered. "I don't even want to *think* about what he might do to poor Laura."

"Try," Charles said evenly. "What *do* you think he would do to her?" When Selina did not answer immediately, he added sharply, "I want to know, Selina. Answer me."

"Don't use that tone with me," Selina said, not accustomed to intimidation. "I'm not an adversary, you know. If anything, I'm trying to help you."

In a more composed voice, Charles said, "Then please tell me what you think Warren Dade would do to Laura if he were to discover that she and I were having an affair."

"Beat her senseless," Selina replied as emotionlessly as she could. "Have her cared for at home until she was well enough, then beat her senseless again. Do that over and over until she was in suitable condition for commitment to some very private, very discreet, very *expensive* sanitarium—"

"Could he *do* that?"

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"The very rich can do many things that ordinary people cannot do, Charles."

Charles rose and paced the porch, his face set with concern. Selina let him brood in silence while she resumed munching the chocolate grahams and sipping coffee. Her expression, when Charles shifted his eyes to study it, was inscrutable, as if she had been speaking of strangers. He had always found Selina Dalbro to be somewhat aloof, despite her wide-ranging social and charitable activities, but of course Charles had never discussed with her anything quite this personal. Maybe, he decided in passing, Selina's enigmatic aplomb was because she too was one of the very rich.

"Why are we having this conversation, Selina?" Charles asked abruptly, stopping to face her directly.

"Because, Charles," she answered quietly, "if things should happen in the future that you do not expect to happen, things that you could never *imagine* happening, I simply want you to know *why*. Warren Dade is a borderline sociopath—one with charm, style, and class, to be sure—but a sociopath nevertheless. A lot of his urges are vented by his constant hunting and killing of helpless creatures, but his basic tendencies remain. And Laura herself is little more than another helpless creature totally under his control."

Awhile later, when Selina was preparing to leave, she said, in the softest tone she had yet used, "I'm sorry if I've upset you, Charles. But I felt it was important to say those things."

After she was gone, Charles sat alone on the porch for a long time. That night, he was unable to go to sleep for several hours after his usual bedtime. Dreadful thoughts plagued his mind and kept him awake: thoughts of Laura at the mercy of Warren Dade—and of the punishment he would be able to perpetrate upon her if he did in fact learn of her infidelity with Charles. It was gnawing to think about it in general, near maddening to imagine the specifics.

When he finally did fall into a thrashed sort of sleep, it was with the determination to somehow settle the matter, to find a way to protect Laura Dade from the veiled dangers that Selina Dalbro had told him hovered over her existence.

Charles did not know what he would do, or how he would do it—but he committed himself to doing *something*.

Tomorrow he would start by going into the city and finding Laura, wherever she was. He could no longer wait for her to come to him.

Charles was awakened early the next morning by the sound of a scream.

He sat up in bed, uncertain whether it had been an actual scream or part of a dream that had gone instantly from his memory. Only silence followed. Rising, he walked naked to the partially

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open window and raised it fully. Leaning down on the sill with the heels of his hands, he listened intently. Outside, it was just after daybreak, bleak, with a thin coolness to the air, the forest around him hushed and still. Shivering as the crisp air coming through the window enveloped his body, he was about to turn away when he heard another sound—a soft moan, barely audible, coming from the direction of the clearing.

Quickly pulling on trousers and pushing his feet into an old pair of moccasins, Charles also got into a light field jacket, not even bothering to button it as he hurried outside. Barely a few feet out the door, he stopped short. Selina Dalbro's teal-blue Bentley was parked just down the road leading into the compound.

What the hell—?

Confounded, he started toward the car. As he came nearer to it, he saw Selina sitting in the driver's seat, looking almost indifferent, as if patiently waiting for a stoplight to change. Charles quickened his pace toward her. Then, in his peripheral vision, to the left, he caught a slight movement and stopped again. Laura was there, at the edge of the clearing, and had turned to stare at him. She wore a dark green leather jumpsuit that matched the forest, and her left hand and forearm were gloved and wrapped. In her right hand she held a rufter hood and leg jesses.

Out in the clearing, the mannequin target was lying on the ground, pulled up from its posthole. And there was something lying next to it—

Charles walked deliberately out onto the clearing. At some point, Laura walked across and fell in beside him. Charles did not look at her and neither of them spoke. When they reached the fallen target dummy, Charles saw that the other object on the ground next to it was a man, clothed in green camouflage hunting garb, one hand still on a fine, expensive Italian shotgun, which Charles could tell was twelve-gauge and choke-fitted for bird shooting. The carotid artery on the right side of the man's neck had been sliced open all the way in to the internal jugular; blood was pumping out in slow, bubbly spurts as his heart forced its final beats. More blood flowed freely from the man's open mouth, where his tongue had been pecked out.

"Charles, this is Warren Dade," Laura said quietly, "my late husband."

High in the sky above, Charles saw Jezebel frolicking freely.

Selina Dalbro came up and stood between them. "I knew he wouldn't be able to resist this temptation once we told him we could arrange it," she said.

Laura leaned her head on Selina's shoulder, and the older woman put an arm around her.

"Is it over now, Selina?" Laura asked. "First your husband. Now

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mine. Can we be together now?"

"Yes, my angel," Selina said, squeezing her in a hug. "Will you wait in the car for me, please? I want to have a word with Charles."

Without a backward glance, Laura turned and walked away.

Selina faced Charles, who now had an almost vacant expression on his face.

"Everything that led up to this has been very complicated, Charles," she told him, "but the situation now becomes very simple. Of course, I'm sorry that we had to deceive you; however, I'm sure you can see that it was necessary. But as I said, from here on it's simple. You must do three things now: take the target dummy and burn it in your trash barrel, get Jezebel back in her cage, and call the county police. Your story is that when you came outside this morning, you found this body: a hunter who had been illegally poaching in the forest preserve. They'll find his Jeep parked back near the highway. Your theory about what happened is that it must have been a wild bird—a hawk or even a small eagle—that was attracted by your aviary. The poacher happened onto the scene and the wild bird saw the opportunity for fresh prey. There will be a cursory investigation, a little publicity, and then it will all be over. The attorney for the Society will be on hand to represent you at all times, of course, although I'm sure you won't need him; no one is going to doubt your story."

Selina folded her arms across the Louis Feraud car coat she wore and paced a few steps.

"A week or ten days from now, the entire matter will be all but forgotten. I'll see that your funding is increased significantly. And it won't be necessary for you to come into the city for any more Society cocktail parties or dinners; I know how you detested that. You may stay on here," she spread her arms out, "as long as you like. Completely autonomous. I'll approve any expenses you have. Jezebel's almost ready for trials in the Congo, isn't she? Plan a nice long trip for yourself." Hesitating, she pursed her beautifully sculpted lips for a moment, pondering whether she had forgotten anything. Then she smiled. "Well, Charles, that's everything, I think. I'll be in touch. Goodbye for now."

Selina started to walk away, but paused after a few steps and looked back.

"If it's any comfort to you, Charles, I want you to know that Laura became genuinely fond of you. Just as I am genuinely fond of you." She winked at him. "Perhaps we'll both come out and spend the day with you sometime soon."

Moments later, she was in her teal-blue Bentley with Laura Dade and the car made a U-turn and headed back out of the compound.

High overhead, Jezebel began circling as she prepared to come home to the aviary. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

TABLE TALK, 1882

by Boris Akunin

Translated from the Russian by Anthony Olcott

After the coffee and liqueurs, the conversation turned to mystery.

Deliberately not looking at her new guest—a collegiate assessor* and the season's most fashionable man—Lidia Nikolaevna Odintsova, hostess of the salon, remarked, "All Moscow is saying Bismarck must have poisoned poor Skobelev. Can it really be that society is to remain ignorant of the truth behind this horrible tragedy?"

The guest to whom Lidia Nikolaevna was treating her regulars today was Erast Petrovich Fandorin. He was maddeningly handsome, cloaked in an aura of mystery, and a bachelor besides. In order to inveigle Erast Petrovich into her salon, the hostess had had to bring off an extremely complex intrigue consisting of many parts—an undertaking at which she was an unsurpassed mistress.

*"Collegiate Assessor" was a civil title—one of 14 that Peter the Great established when he reformed Russia's bureaucracy—indicating a high rank, the threshold at which someone attained life nobility. The equivalent rank in the army was major.

Boris Akunin's novels have sold more than eight million copies in Russia and Europe since they first started appearing in the mid '90s. The ten books to date, historicals featuring young Russian detective Erast Fandorin, combine humor, espionage, detection, adventure, and multiple plot twists in such an original combination that Mr. Akunin is sometimes said to have invented a new Russian literary genre. The pseudonymous Moscow author is relatively new to the American scene: So far only the Fandorin books *The Winter Queen* and *Murder on the Leviathan* (Random House) are out in the U.S., but more are sure to come. The series is translated into 26 languages.

B. Akunin © 2000; first published in Russian **Playboy**; translation ©2003 by Anthony Olcott

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Her sally was addressed to Arkhip Giatsintovich Mustafin, an old friend of the house. A man of fine mind, Mustafin caught Lidia Nikolaevna's intention at the first hint and, casting a sideways glance at the young collegiate assessor from beneath his ruddy and lashless eyelids, intoned, "Ah, but I've been told our White General* may have been destroyed by a fatal passion."

The others at the table held their breath, as it was rumored that Erast Petrovich, who until quite recently had served in the office of Moscow's Governor-General as an officer for special missions, had had a most direct relation to the investigation into events surrounding the death of the great commander. However, disappointment awaited the guests, for the handsome Fandorin listened politely to Arkhip Giatsintovich with an air suggesting that the words had nothing whatever to do with him.

This brought about the one situation which an experienced hostess could not permit—an awkward silence. Lidia Nikolaevna knew immediately what to do. Lowering her eyelids, she came to Mustafin's assistance. "This is so very like the mysterious disappearance of poor Polinka Karakina! Surely you recall that dreadful story, my friend?"

"How could I not?" Arkhip drawled, indicating his gratitude with a quick lift of an eyebrow.

Some of the party nodded as if also remembering, but most of the guests clearly knew nothing about Polinka Karakina. In addition, Mustafin had a reputation as a most exquisite raconteur, such that it would be no penance to hear even a familiar tale from his lips. So here Molly Sapegina, a charming young woman whose husband—such a tragedy—had been killed in Turkestan a year ago, asked with curiosity, "A mysterious disappearance? How interesting!"

Lidia Nikolaevna made as if to accommodate herself to her chair more comfortably, so also letting Mustafin know that she was passing nourishment of the table talk into his capable hands.

"Many of us, of course, still recall old Prince Lev Lvovich Karakin,"—so Arkhip Giatsintovich began his tale. "He was a man of the old sort, a hero of the Hungarian campaign. He had no taste for the liberal vagaries of our late Tsar, and so retired to his lands outside Moscow, where he lived like a nabob of Hindi. He was fabulously wealthy, of an estate no longer found among the aristocracy of today.

"The prince had two daughters, Polinka and Anyuta. I beg you to note, no Frenchified *Pauline* or English *Annie.* The general held the very strictest of patriotic views. The girls were twins. Face, fig-

*Skobelev: general whose militant pan-Slavic views and predictions of inevitable conflict with Germany got him in trouble with the government in St. Petersburg and resulted in his recall to the capital, where, in 1882, he died of heart failure.

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ure, voice, all were identical. They were not to be confused, however, for right here, on her right cheek, Anyuta had a birthmark. Lev Lvovich's wife had died in childbirth, and the prince did not marry again. He always said that it was a lot of fuss and he had no need—after all, there was no shortage of serving girls. And indeed, he had no shortage of serving girls, even after the emancipation. For, as I said, Lev Lvovich lived the life of a true nabob."

"For shame, Archie! Without vulgarity, if you please," Lidia Nikolaevna remonstrated with a stern smile, although she knew perfectly well that a good story is never hurt by "adding a little pepper," as the English say.

Mustafin pressed his palm to his breast in apology, then continued his tale. "Polinka and Anyuta were far from being horrors, but it would also be difficult to call them great beauties. However, as we all know, a dowry of millions is the best of cosmetics, so that in the season when they debuted, they produced something like a fever epidemic among the eligible bachelors of Moscow. But then the old prince took some sort of offense at our honored Governor-General and withdrew to his piney Sosnovka, never to leave the place again.

"Lev Lvovich was a heavyset fellow, short-winded and red-faced, a man prone to apoplexy, as they say, so there was reason to hope that the princesses' imprisonment would not last long. However, the years went on, Prince Karakin grew ever fatter, flying into ever more thunderous rages, and evinced no intention whatsoever of dying. The suitors waited and waited and in the end quite forgot about the poor prisoners.

"Although it was said to be in the Moscow region, Sosnovka was in fact in the deep forests of Zaraisky district, not only nowhere near the railroad, but a good twenty versts even from the nearest well-traveled road. The wilderness, in a word. To be sure, it was a heavenly place, and excellently established. I have a little village nearby, so that I often called on the prince as a neighbor. The black grouse shooting there is exquisite, but that spring especially the birds seemed to fly right into one's sights—I've never seen the like in all my days. So, in the end, I became a habitué of the house, which is why the entire tale unfolded right before my eyes.

"The old prince had been trying for some time to construct a belvedere in his park, in the Viennese style. He had first hired a famous architect from Moscow, who had drawn up the plans and even started the construction, but then didn't finish it—he could not endure the prince's bullheaded whims and so had departed. To finish the work they summoned an architect of somewhat lower flight, a Frenchman named Renar. Young, and rather handsome. True, he was noticeably lame, but since Lord Byron our young ladies have never counted this as a defect.

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"What happened next you can imagine for yourselves. The two maidens had been sitting in the country for a decade now, never once getting out. They both were twenty-eight years old, with absolutely no society of any sort, save for the arrival of the odd fuddy-duddy such as myself, come to hunt. And suddenly—a handsome young man of lively mind, and from Paris at that.

"I have to say that, for all their outward similarity, the two princesses were of totally different temperament and spiritual cast. Anyuta was like Pushkin's Tatyana, prone to lassitude, a touch melancholic, a little pedantic, and, to be blunt, a bit tedious. As for Polinka, she was frolicsome, mischievous, 'simple as a poet's life, sweet as a lover's kiss,' as the poet has it. And she was far less settled into old-maidish ways.

"Renar lived there a bit, had a look around, and, naturally enough, set his cap at Polinka. I watched all this from the sidelines, rejoicing greatly, and of course not once suspecting the incredible way in which this pastoral idyll would end. Polinka besotted by love, the Frenchie giddy with the whiff of millions, and Anyuta smoldering with jealousy, forced to assume the role of vessel of common sense. I confess that I enjoyed watching this comedy at least as much as I did the mating dance of the black grouse. The noble father, of course, continued to be oblivious of all this, because he was arrogant and unable to imagine that a Princess Karakina might feel attracted to some lowly sort of architect.

"It all ended in scandal, of course. One evening Anyuta chanced . . . or perhaps there was nothing chance about it . . . Anyuta glanced into a little house in the garden, found her sister and Renar there in flagrante delicto, and immediately informed their father. Wrathful Lev Lvovich, who escaped apoplexy only by a miracle, wanted to drive the offender from his estate immediately. The Frenchman was able only with the greatest difficulty to plead to be allowed to remain at the estate until the morning, for the forests around Sosnovka were such that a solitary night traveler could well be eaten by wolves. Had I not intervened, the malefactor would have been turned out of the gates dressed in nothing but his frock coat.

"The sobbing Polinka was sent to her bedroom under the eye of her prudent sister, the architect was sent to his room in one of the wings to pack his suitcase, the servants scattered, and the full brunt of the prince's wrath came to be borne precisely by your humble servant. Lev Lvovich raged almost until dawn, wearing me out entirely, so that I scarcely slept that night. Nevertheless, in the morning I saw from the window how the Frenchman was hauled off to the station in a plain flat farm cart. Poor fellow, he kept looking up to the windows, but clearly there was no one waving him farewell, or so his terribly droopy look seemed to say.

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"Then marvels began to occur. The princesses did not appear for breakfast. Their bedroom door was locked, and there was no response to knocks. The prince began to boil again, showing signs of an inevitable apoplexy. He gave orders to splinter the door, and devil take the hindmost. Which was done, everyone rushed in, and . . . Good heavens! Anyuta lay in her bed, as if in deepest sleep, while there was no sign of Polinka whatsoever. She had vanished. She wasn't in the house, she wasn't in the park . . . it was as if she had slipped down through the very earth.

"No matter how hard they tried to wake Anyuta, it was to no avail. The family doctor, who had lived there on the estate, had died not long before, and no new one had yet been hired. Thus they had to send to the district hospital. The government doctor came, one of those long-haired fellows. He poked her, he squeezed her, and then he said she was suffering from a most serious nervous disorder. Leave her lie, and she would awake.

"The carter who had hauled off the Frenchman returned. He was a faithful man, his whole life spent at the estate. He swore to heaven that he had carted Renar right to the station and put him on the train. The young gentle-lady had not been with him. And anyway, how could she have gotten past the gate? The park at Sosnovka was surrounded by a high stone wall, and there was a guard at the gate.

"Anyuta did wake the following day, but there was no getting anything from her. She had lost the ability to speak. All she could do was weep, tremble, and rattle her teeth. After a week she began to speak a little, but she remembered nothing of that night. If she were pressed with questions, she would immediately begin to shudder and convulse. The doctor forbade such questions in the very strictest terms, saying that it endangered her life.

"So Polinka had vanished. The prince lost his mind utterly. He wrote repeatedly to the governor and even to the Tsar himself. He roused the police. He had Renar followed in Moscow—but it was all for naught. The Frenchman labored away, trying to find clients, but to no avail—nobody wanted a quarrel with Karakin. So the poor fellow left for his native Paris. Even so, Lev Lvovich continued to rage. He got it into his head that the villain had killed his beloved Polinka and buried her somewhere. He had the whole park dug up, and the pond drained, killing all his priceless carp. Nothing. A month passed, and the apoplexy finally came. The prince sat down to dinner, gave out a sudden wheeze, and *plop!* Facedown in his soup bowl. And no wonder, really, after suffering so much.

"After that night it wasn't so much that Anyuta was touched in the head as that her character was markedly changed. Even before, she hadn't been noted for any particular gaiety, but now

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she would scarcely even open her mouth. The slightest sound would set her atremble. I confess, sinner that I am, that I am no great lover of tragedy. I fled from Sosnovka while the prince was still alive. When I came for the funeral, saints above, the estate was changed beyond recognition. The place had become dreadful, as if some raven had folded its black wing over it. I looked about and I remember thinking, *This place is going to be abandoned.* And so it came to be.

"Anyuta, the sole heir, had no desire to live there and so she went away. Not to Moscow, either, or someplace in Europe, but to the very ends of the earth. The estate manager sends her money to Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro. I checked on a globe to find that Rio is absolutely on the other side of the world from Sosnovka. Just think—Brazil! Not a Russian face to be seen anywhere!" Arkhip Giatsintovich ended his strange tale with a sigh.

"Why do you say that? I have an acquaintance in Brazil, a former c-colleague of mine in the Japanese embassy, Karl Ivanovich Veber," Erast Petrovich Fandorin murmured thoughtfully, having listened to the story with interest. The officer for special missions had a soft and pleasant manner of speaking, in no way spoiled by his slight stammer. "Veber is an envoy to the Brazilian emperor D-Don Pedro now. So it's hardly the end of the earth."

"Is that so?" Arkhip Giatsintovich turned animatedly. "So perhaps this mystery might yet be solved? Ah, my dear Erast Petrovich, people say that you have a brilliant analytic mind, that you can crack mysteries of all sorts, like so many walnuts. Now here's a problem for you that doesn't seem to have a logical solution. On the one hand, Polinka Karakina vanished from the estate—that's a fact. On the other hand, there's no way she could have gotten out of the garden, and that's also a fact."

"Yes, yes," several of the ladies started at once, "Mr. Fandorin, Erast Petrovich, we so terribly want to know what really happened there!"

"I'm prepared to make a wager that Erast Petrovich will be able to resolve this paradox quite easily," the hostess Odintsova announced with confidence.

"A wager?" Mustafin inquired immediately. "And what are you willing to wager?"

It must be explained that both Lidia Nikolaevna and Arkhip Giatsintovich were avid gamblers whose passion for making wagers sometimes approached lunacy. The more insightful of the guests glanced at one another, suspicious that this entire interlude, with a tale supposedly recalled solely by chance, had been staged by prior agreement, and that the young official had fallen victim to a clever intrigue.

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"I quite like that little Bouchet of yours," Arkhip Giatsintovich said with a slight bow.

"And I your large Caravaggio," the hostess answered him in the same tone of voice.

Mustafin simply rocked his head a bit, as if admiring Odintsova's voracious appetite, but said nothing. Apparently he had no qualms about victory. Or, perhaps, the stakes had already been decided between them in advance.

A bit startled at such swiftness, Erast Petrovich spread his hands. "But I have not visited the site of the event, and I have never seen the p-participants. As I recall, even having all the necessary information, the police were not able to do anything. So what am I to do now? And it's probably been quite some time as well, I imagine."

"Six years this October," came the answer.

"W-well then, you see . . ."

"Dear, wonderful Erast Petrovich," the hostess implored, "don't ruin me utterly. I've already agreed to this extortionist's terms. He'll simply take my Bouchet and be gone! That gentleman has not the slightest drop of chivalry in him!"

"My ancestors were Tartar *murza,* warlords!" Arkhip Giatsintovich confirmed gaily. "We in the Horde keep our chat with the ladies short."

However, chivalry was far from an empty word for Fandorin, apparently. The young man rubbed the bridge of his nose with a finger and muttered, "Well, so that's how it is. . . . Well, Mr. Mustafin, you . . . you didn't chance to notice, did you, what kind of bag the Frenchman had? You did see him leave, you said. So probably there was some large kind of trunk?"

Arkhip Giatsintovich made as if to applaud. "Bravo! He hid the girl in the trunk and carted her off? And Polinka gave the meddlesome sister something nasty to drink, which is why Anyuta collapsed into nervous disorder? Clever. But alas . . . There was no trunk. The Frenchman flew off as light as an eagle. I remember some small suitcases of some sort, some bundles, a couple of hatboxes. No, my good sir, your explanation simply won't wash."

Fandorin thought a bit, then asked, "You are quite sure that the princess could not have won the guards to her side, or perhaps just bribed them?"

"Absolutely. That was the first thing the police checked."

Strangely, at these words the collegiate assessor suddenly became very gloomy and sighed, then said, "Then your tale is much nastier than I had thought." Then, after a long pause, he said, "Tell me, did the prince's house have plumbing?"

"Plumbing? In the countryside?" Molly Sapegina asked in astonishment, then giggled uncertainly, having decided that the hand-

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some official was joking. However, Arkhip Giatsintovich screwed his gold-rimmed monocle into one eye and looked at Fandorin extremely attentively, as if he had only just properly noticed him. "How did you guess that? As it happens, there *was* plumbing at the estate. A year before the events that I have described, the prince had ordered the construction of a pumping station and a boiler room. Lev Lvovich, the princesses, and the guest rooms all had quite proper bathrooms. But what does that have to do with the business at hand?"

"I think that your p-paradox is resolved." Fandorin rocked his head. "The resolution, though, is awfully unpleasant."

"But how? Resolved by what? What happened?" Questions came from all sides.

"I'll tell you in a moment. But first, Lidia Nikolaevna, I would like to give your lackey a certain assignment."

With all present completely entranced, the collegiate assessor then wrote a little note of some sort, handed it to the lackey, and whispered something quietly into the man's ear. The clock on the mantel chimed midnight, but no one had the slightest thought of leaving. All held their breath and waited, but Erast Petrovich was in no hurry to begin this demonstration of his analytic gifts. Bursting with pride at her faultless intuition, which once again had served her well in her choice of a main guest, Lidia Nikolaevna looked at the young man with almost maternal tenderness. This officer of special missions had every chance of becoming a true star of her salon. Which would make Katie Polotskaya and Lily Yepanchina green with envy, to be sure!

"The story you shared with us is not so much mysterious as disgusting," the collegiate assessor finally said with a grimace. "One of the most monstrous crimes of passion about which I have ever had occasion to hear. This is no disappearance. It is a murder, of the very worst, Cain-like sort."

"Are you meaning to say that the gay sister was killed by the melancholy sister?" inquired Sergey Ilyich von Taube, chairman of the Excise Chamber.

"No, I wish to say something quite the opposite—gay Polinka killed melancholy Anyuta. And that is not the most nightmarish aspect."

"I do beg your pardon! How can that be?" Sergey Ilyich asked in astonishment, while Lidia Nikolaevna thought it necessary to note, "And what might be more nightmarish than the murder of one's own sister?"

Fandorin rose and began to pace about the sitting room. "I will try to reconstruct the sequence of events, as I understand them. So, we have two p-princesses, withering with boredom. Life dribbling through their fingertips—indeed, all but dribbled away.

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Their feminine life, I mean. Idleness. Moldering spiritual powers. Unrealized hopes. Tormenting relations with their high-handed father. And, not least, physiological frustration. They were, after all, young, healthy women. Oops, please forgive me. . . ."

Conscious that he had said something untoward, the collegiate assessor was embarrassed for a moment, but Lidia Nikolaevna let it pass without a reprimand—he looked so appealing with that blush that suddenly had blossomed on his white cheeks.

"I would not even dare to imagine how much there is intertwined in the soul of a young w-woman who might be in such a situation," Fandorin said after a short silence. "And here is something particular besides—right there, always, is your living mirror image, your twin sister. No doubt it would be impossible for there not to be a most intricate mix of love and hatred between them. And suddenly a young handsome man appears. He demonstrates obvious interest in the young princesses. No doubt with ulterior motive, but which of those girls would have thought of that? Of course, an inevitable rivalry springs up between the girls, but the ch-choice is quickly made. Until that moment everything between Anyuta and Polinka was identical, but now they were in quite different worlds. One of them is happy, returned to the land of the living and, at least to all appearances, loved. While the other feels herself rejected, lonely, and thus doubly unhappy. Happy love is egoistical. For Polinka, no doubt, there was nothing other than the passions that had built up through the long years of being locked away. This was the full and real life that she had dreamed about for so many years, the life she had even stopped hoping for. And then it was all shredded in an instant—indeed, precisely at the moment when love had reached its very highest peak."

The ladies all listened spellbound to the empathetic speech of this picture-perfect young man of beauty, all save for Molly Sapegina, who pressed her slender fingers to her décolletage before freezing in that pose.

"Most dreadful of all was that the agent of this tragedy was one's very own sister. We may agree, of course, to understand her as well. To endure such happiness right alongside one's own unhappiness would require a particular cast of the spirit which Anyuta obviously did not possess. So Polinka, who had only just been lounging in the bowers of Paradise, was cast utterly down. There is no beast in this world more dangerous than a woman deprived of her beloved!" Erast Petrovich exclaimed, a tad carried away, and then immediately grew a bit muddled, since this sentiment might offend the fairer half among those present. However, there came no protests—all were greedily waiting for the story to continue, so Fandorin went on more briskly, "So then, under the influence of despair, Polinka has a mad plan, a terrible, monstrous

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plan, but one that is testament to the enormous power of feeling. Although, I don't know, the plan might have come from Renar. It was the girl who had to put the plan into action, however. . . . That night, while you, Arkhip Giatsintovich, were nodding drowsily and listening to your host pour out his rage, a hellish act was taking place in the bedroom of the princesses. Polinka murdered her sister. I do not know how. Perhaps she smothered her with a pillow, perhaps she poisoned her, but in any event, it occurred without blood, for otherwise there would have remained some trace in the bedroom."

"The investigation considered the possibility of a murder." Mustafin shrugged, having listened to Erast Petrovich with unconcealed scepticism. "However, there arose a rather sensible question—what happened to the body?"

The officer of special missions answered without a moment's hesitation, "That's the nightmarish part. After killing her sister, Polinka dragged her into the bathroom, where she cut her into bits and washed the blood away down the drain. The Frenchman could not have been the one to dismember her—there is no way he could have left his own wing for such a long time without being noticed."

Waiting out a true storm of alarmed exclamations, in which "Impossible!" was the word most often heard, Fandorin said sadly, "Unfortunately, there is no other possibility. There is no other solution to the p-problem as p-posed. It is better not even to attempt to imagine what went on that night in that bathroom. Polinka would not have had the slightest knowledge of anatomy, nor could she have had any instrument more to the purpose than a pilfered kitchen knife."

"But there's no way she could have put the body parts and bones down the drain, it would have plugged!" Mustafin exclaimed with a heat quite unlike him.

"No, she could not. The dismembered flesh left the estate in the Frenchman's various suitcases and hatboxes. Tell me, please, were the bedroom windows high off the ground?"

Arkhip Giatsintovich squinted as he tried to recall. "Not especially. The height of a man, perhaps. And the windows looked out on the park, in the direction of the lawn."

"So, the remains were passed through the w-window, then. Judging by the fact that there were no traces left on the window sill, Renar passed some kind of vessel into the room, Anyuta took it into the bathroom, put the body parts in there, and handed these to her accomplice. When this evil ferrying was done, all Polinka had to do was scour out the bathtub and clean the blood from herself. . . ."

Lidia Nikolaevna desperately wanted to win her bet, but in the interests of fairness she could not remain silent. "Erast Petrovich,

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this all fits together very well, with the exception of one circumstance. If Polinka indeed committed so monstrous an operation, she certainly would have stained her clothing, and blood is not so simple to wash away, especially if one is not a washerwoman."

This note of practicality did not so much puzzle Fandorin as embarrass him. Coughing slightly and looking away, he said quietly, "I im-imagine that before she began dismembering the b-body, the princess removed her clothing. All of it. . . ."

Some of the ladies gasped, while Molly Sapegina, growing pale, murmured, "Oh, *mon Dieu . . .*"

Erast Petrovich, it seemed, was frightened that someone might faint, so he hastened to finish, now in a dry tone of scientific detachment. "It is entirely probable that the extended oblivion of the supposed Anyuta was no simulation, but rather was a natural psychological reaction to a terrible tr-trauma."

Everyone suddenly began speaking at once. "But it wasn't Anyuta that disappeared, it was Polinka!" Sergey Ilyich recalled.

"Well, obviously that was just Polinka drawing a mole on her cheek," the more imaginative Lidia Nikolaevna explained impatiently. "That's why everyone thought she was Anyuta!"

Retired court doctor Stupitsyn did not agree. "Impossible! People close to them are able to distinguish twins quite well. The way they act, the nuances of the voice, the expressions of their eyes, after all!"

"And anyway, why was such a switch necessary?" General Liprandi interrupted the court doctor. "Why would Polinka have to pretend that she was Anyuta?"

Erast Petrovich waited until the flood of questions and objections ebbed, and then answered them one by one. "Had Anyuta disappeared, Your Excellency, then suspicion would inevitably have fallen on Polinka, that she had taken her revenge upon her sister, and so the search for traces of the murder would have been more painstaking. That's one thing. Had the besotted girl vanished at the same time as the Frenchman, this would have brought to the forefront the theory that this was a flight, not a crime. That's two. And then, of course, in the guise of Anyuta, at some time in the future she might marry Renar without giving herself away. Apparently that is precisely what happened in faraway Rio de Janeiro. I am certain that Polinka traveled so far from her native land in order to join the object of her affections in peace." The collegiate assessor turned to the court doctor. "Your argument that intimates are able to distinguish twins is entirely reasonable. Note, however, that the Karakins' family doctor, whom it would have been impossible to deceive, had died not long before. And besides, the supposed Anyuta changed most decidedly after that fateful night, precisely as if she had become someone else. In view of the particular circumstances, everyone took that as nat-

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ural. In fact, this transformation occurred with Polinka, but is it to be wondered at that she lost her former animation and gaiety?"

"And the death of the old prince?" Sergey Ilyich asked. "Wasn't that awfully convenient for the criminal?"

"A most suspicious death," agreed Fandorin. "It is entirely possible that poison may have been involved. There was no autopsy, of course—his sudden demise was attributed to paternal grief and a disposition to apoplexy, but at the same time it is entirely possible that after a night such as that, a trifle like poisoning one's own father would not much bother Polinka. By the way, it would not be too late to conduct an exhumation even now. Poison is preserved a long while in the bone tissue."

"I'll bet that the prince was poisoned," Lidia Nikolaevna said quickly, turning to Arkhip Giatsintovich, who pretended that he had not heard.

"An inventive theory. And clever, too," Mustafin said at length. "However, one must have an exceedingly active imagination to picture Princess Karakina carving up the body of her own sister with a bread knife while dressed in the garb of Eve."

Everyone again began speaking at once, defending both points of view with equal ardor, although the ladies inclined to Fandorin's version of events, while the gentlemen rejected it as improbable. The cause of the argument took no part in the discussion himself, although he listened to the points of both sides with interest.

"Oh, but why are you remaining silent?!" Lidia Nikolaevna called to him, as she pointed at Mustafin. "Clearly, he is arguing against something perfectly obvious simply in order not to give up his stake. Tell him, say something else that will force him into silence!"

"I am waiting for your Matvey to return," Erast Petrovich replied tersely.

"But where did you send him?"

"To the Governor-General's staff headquarters. The telegraph office there is open around the clock."

"But that's on Tverskoy Boulevard, five minutes' walk from here, and he's been gone more than an hour!" someone wondered.

"Matvey was ordered to wait for the reply," the officer of special missions explained, then again fell silent while Arkhip Giatsintovich held everyone's attention with an expansive explanation of the ways in which Fandorin's theory was completely impossible from the viewpoint of female psychology.

Just at the most effective moment, as Mustafin was holding forth most convincingly about the innate properties of the feminine nature, which is ashamed of nudity and cannot endure the sight of blood, the door quietly opened and the long-awaited Matvey entered. Treading silently, he approached the collegiate assessor and, with a bow, proffered a sheet of paper.

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Erast Petrovich turned, read the note, then nodded. The hostess, who had been watching the young man's face attentively, could not endure to wait any longer, and so moved her chair closer to her guest. "Well, what's there?" she whispered.

"I was right," Fandorin answered, also in a whisper.

That instant Odintsova interrupted the lecture. "Enough nonsense, Arkhip Giatsintovich! What do you know of the feminine nature, you who have never even been married! Erast Petrovich has incontrovertible proof!" She took the telegram from the collegiate assessor's hand and passed it around the circle.

Flabbergasted, the guests read the telegram, which consisted of three words:

"Yes. Yes. No."

"And that's it? What is this? Where is it from?" Such were the general questions.

"The telegram was sent from the Russian mission in Br-Brazil," Fandorin explained. "You see the diplomatic stamp there? It is deep night here in Moscow, but in Rio de Janeiro right now the mission is in attendance. I was counting on that when I ordered Matvey to wait for a reply. As for the telegram, I recognize the laconic style of Karl Ivanovich Veber. This is how my message read. Matvey, give me the paper, will you? The one I gave you." Erast Petrovich took the paper from the lackey and read aloud, "'Karl, old boy, inform me the following soonest: Is Russian subject born Princess Anyuta Karakina now resident in Brazil married? If yes, is her husband lame? And does the princess have a mole on her right cheek? I need all this for a bet. Fandorin.' From the answer to the message it is clear that the pr-princess is married to a lame man, and has no mole on her cheek. Why would she need the mole now? In far-off Brazil there is no need to run to such clever tricks. As you see, ladies and gentlemen, Polinka is alive and well, married to her Renar. The terrible tale has an idyllic ending. By the by, the lack of a mole shows once again that Renar was a witting participant in the murder and knows perfectly well that he is married precisely to Polinka, and not to Anyuta."

"So, I shall give orders to fetch the Caravaggio," Odintsova said to Arkhip Giatsintovich with a victorious smile. ●

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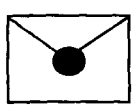

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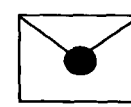

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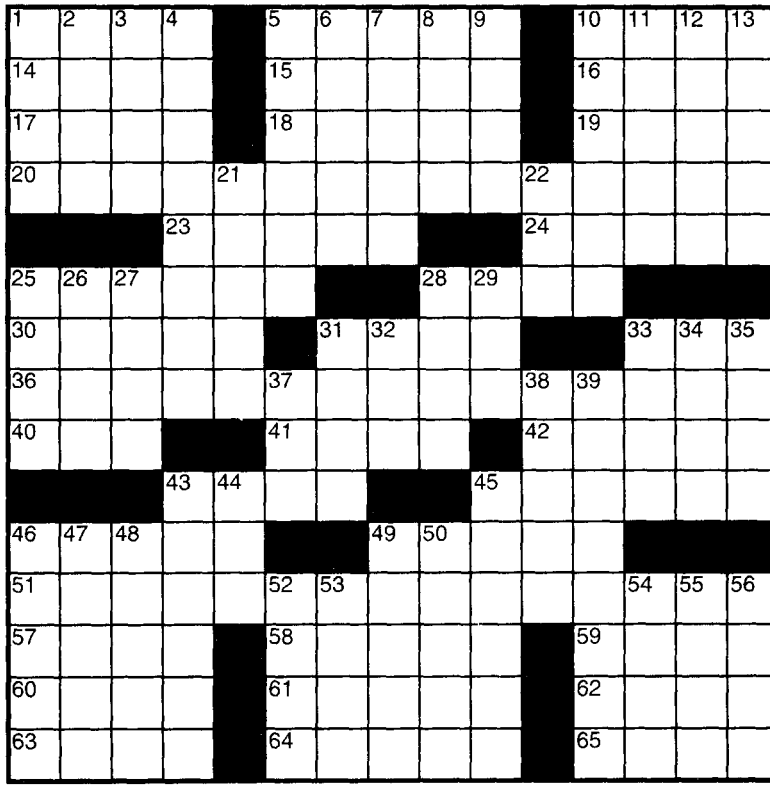
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

"Let There Be Light—"

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 57

ACROSS

1. Red and Black
5. Papas' partners
10. Josephine Tey's Inspector Grant
14. "The____Romantic," Raymond Steiber (*EQMM* April 2002)
15. Notable historical period
16. Precedes fountain or water
17. Diva's solo
18. Guava
19. Frankenstein's assistant
20. Locations (Thomas H. Cook)
23. Summons
24. Coty and Descartes

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25. Sergeant's command
28. Minus
30. Menu in Marseilles
31. West German river
33. Popular Thanksgiving vegetable
36. Film based on J.B. Priestly novel *Benighted*
40. Pouch
41. Ms. Perry
42. Sign up
43. Mrs. Copperfield
45. Consecrate
46. *The Gracie* _____ *Murder Case,* S.S. Van Dine
49. Lustrous fabric
51. Sounds (Andrew Coburn)
57. Adverse
58. Exclusive
59. Jai _____
60. Not "the life of the party!"
61. Tributary of the Lena
62. Obtains
63. Family, for one
64. Lascivious looks
65. Some murder weapons

DOWN

1. Hit
2. Mr. Biggers
3. Where the Tigris flows
4. Disconnected musical notes
5. Small red spot in childhood disease
6. _____ *Fool Dead,* Carolyn Hart
7. Complains
8. I.R.S. employee
9. Iranian title
10. Some lines in the theater
11. Boston's airport
12. Worship
13. Informers
21. Support for Mrs. Alleyn, nee Agatha Troy
22. Aquatic bird
25. Fifth book in the New Testament
26. African bird
27. Husband of Enide
28. Arid
29. Miss.' neighbor
31. Ms. Buchanan
32. Bill Crider's Texas sheriff Rhodes
33. Russian cosmonaut Gagarin
34. " . . . unto us _____ is given," Isaiah 9:6
35. Liquefy
37. Women's organization
38. Skater Sonja
39. Iroquois tribe
43. Choose
44. *The Golden* _____, Elizabeth Peters
45. Socrates' birthplace
46. _____-garde
47. Recluse
48. Petrol measure
49. Derogatory
50. Rose oil
52. Guarantee
53. *Winnie* _____ *Pu*
54. J.S. Borthwick's sleuth McKenzie
55. Rank
56. _____ *Me Deadly,* Mickey Spillane

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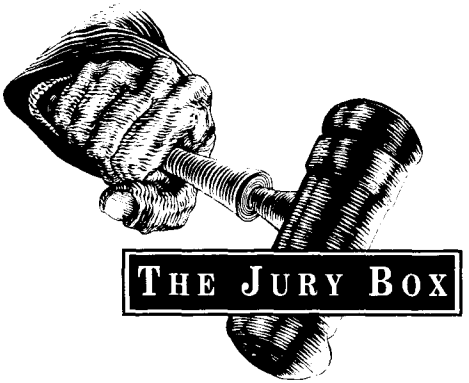

by Jon L. Breen

Recent months have seen a number of publications to help us commemorate the birthday of Sherlock Holmes. Two diverting pastiches have been reprinted in trade paperback. Among the playful features of John Lescroart's World-War-I-period 1986 novel *Son of Holmes* (NAL, $14) are dueling disclaimers: One says it's fiction; the other swears it's all true. Title character Auguste Lupa would become better known under another name, never mentioned but generously clued. Stephen Kendrick's 2001 novel *Night Watch* (Berkley, $13), though not especially distinguished in prose, plot, or dialogue, is interesting for its religious background and Holmes's collaboration with Father Brown. (For an ambitious two-volume edition of G.K. Chesterton's 53 stories about the detecting priest, serious collectors should consider *The Complete Annotated Father Brown* [The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, $150], with footnotes by John Peterson, critical commentary by Pasquale Accardo, reproductions of original magazine illustrations, and new ones by Laurie Fraser Manifold.)

For a handy biographical reference on the Baker Street sleuth, Barry Day has organized quotations from the original stories (with a minimum of Sherlockian speculation) into *Sherlock Holmes: In His Own Words and in the Words of Those Who Knew Him* (Taylor, $24.95), including illustrations by Sidney Paget, Frederic Dorr Steele, and others.

Also among the new books are a volume of pastiches and three examples of a related subgenre: fiction about Arthur Conan Doyle.

*** Ted Riccardi: *The Oriental Casebook of Sherlock Holmes,* Random House, $24.95. Though these nine cases occurred between 1891 and 1894, after Holmes's apparent death at Reichenbach Falls and before his return to London, Dr. Wat-

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son is present as narrator, prodding the great detective for accounts of his "lost" years in Nepal, Tibet, India, and other points East. The volume is more distinguished as Victorian-era travelogue than detective fiction, but Middle East and Asian scholar Riccardi does an excellent job approximating the style of the original stories.

*** Howard Engel: *Mr. Doyle and Dr. Bell*, Overlook, $24.95. In 1879 Edinburgh, medical student Conan Doyle plays Watson to the Holmes of Dr. Joseph Bell, trying to save an unjustly accused man from the gallows in a fictional situation inspired by Doyle's later real-life intervention in the Oscar Slater case. Present in supporting roles are Robert Louis Stevenson and Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. First published in Canada in 1997, this is another example of Engel's expert storytelling, spinning a sound whodunit while bringing the past and its people to life.

*** David Pirie: *The Night Calls,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. The time is roughly the same, but Pirie's version of the Bell-Doyle relationship is less comfortable and chummy, and there is more background of Doyle's unhappy family circumstances. The plot begins with the search for a serial slasher of prostitutes and the upstream battle of early female medical students. After the antagonist (a name familiar to true-crime buffs) is revealed slightly over halfway through, the novel becomes more episodic and loses some momentum, but there's plenty going on throughout. Some may find the finishing cliffhanger more irritating than thrilling.

** Dennis Burges: *Graves Gate,* Carroll & Graf, $25. Here we move from the young Doyle of Engel and Pirie to the venerable figure of several decades later, when his beliefs in spiritualism and fairy photos have somewhat damaged his high reputation. The paranormal mystery plot is clever enough, though many readers will figure out the main secret way ahead of the characters. The author's distracting carelessness with period language (and not for comic effect as in Wishart, below) is at its worst in Doyle's inquiry, "What part of being a spirit is it that you two are having trouble understanding?" (page 323). There is also a 1922 reference to the "Agatha Christie case," which, assuming this refers to her disappearance, didn't occur until 1926.

*** Adam Hall: *Quiller Balalaika,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $24. In a novel completed by Hall (pseudonym of Elleston Trevor) shortly before his death in 1995 and published in Britain in 1996, Quiller takes on the post-Soviet *mafiya* that threatens Russia's new capitalist economy. The improbable plot, culminating in an impossible prison escape, is super-spy standard, but the vivid prose and sense of looming danger

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that are the great storyteller's hallmarks are right on target, and all the more affecting when you know, from two moving afterwords by son Jean-Pierre Trevor and widow Chaille Trevor, under what difficult conditions Quiller's final adventure was written.

*** Gayle Lynds: *Robert Ludlum's The Altman Code,* St. Martin's, $15.95. Dr. Jon Smith, of the super-secret Covert-One intelligence agency, stars in a large-canvas international thriller centered on the suspicious cargo of a Chinese ship heading for Iraq. Discriminating readers may be as wary of "franchise" books as of celebrity mysteries and movie/TV novelizations, but in all three categories it depends on who's doing them. This is an expert job of personnel and plot-strand management by a writer at least as skilled as the late Ludlum himself. (The novel is also available in audio editions read by Don Leslie [Audio Renaissance, $39.95 unabridged cassettes, $29.95 abridged CDs].)

** David Wishart: *A Vote for Murder,* Trafalgar/Hodder & Stoughton, $24.95. Marcus Corvinus, yet another ancient Roman private eye, seeks the killer of a small-town election candidate. It's quite amusing and readable, though not in a class with the work of Steven Saylor or Lindsey Davis. If you have found Davis's characters anachronistic in their language and attitudes, be advised that Wishart makes her look like Plautus. I kept expecting Corvinus to check his e-mail.

Isaac Asimov's *The Return of the Black Widowers* (Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $24) closes the books on a favorite *EQMM* series with Harlan Ellison's entertaining introduction, identifying some of the real-life models for the problem-solving dining club's members; eleven stories selected from earlier collections; six previously uncollected tales, lesser efforts but still enjoyable; two fine homages, William Brittain's "The Men Who Read Isaac Asimov" (1978) and editor Charles Ardai's "The Last Story" (2002); and an afterword by the much-missed Asimov himself.

Max Allan Collins's *Quarry's Greatest Hits* (Five Star, $25.95) includes the 1987 novel *Primary Target* plus the only three short stories about a hired killer who antedated the hit-man protagonists of Loren D. Estleman and Lawrence Block. Ed Gorman's amusing introduction (imagining Collins pitching the then-very-unlikely series idea to his agent) and the author's note on the character's creation add to the value.

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A Nightcap of Hemlock

by Francis M. Nevins

She sat forward in the roomy leather seat of the Starco corporate jet and squinted out the Plexiglas window at clouds pure as sea foam and, as the plane began its descent, at tracts of lush forest and the river glistening in spring sunlight. She saw none of it. *Never again*, the jet's motors seemed to hum, *never again*. The unseen pilot touched down at the small private airport, taxied along a runway to a smooth stop. The motors shut down and she unbelted herself and retrieved her bag from the luggage bin.

A man was waiting for her at the foot of the wheeled staircase she descended. Blocky, buzz-cut, bundled in a bomber jacket against the March chill. "Lieutenant Holt? Bill Nodella. I guess you could say I'm your counterpart in this neck of the woods."

His bullfrog voice was all too familiar from the call she had taken at her condo that morning. She blinked through her spectacles and held out her hand. "Oh yes, you're the one who called me about Paul's . . ." She couldn't make herself complete the sentence.

"General Anderson's death," he finished for her. She let him take her carry-on bag and lead her to a county police sedan parked in a No Parking slot outside the airport administration building. Once ensconced in the backseat, she noticed in the rear-vision mirror that the uniformed man behind the wheel chewed gum.

"I can't say I enjoyed the ride terribly much," she said, twisting her awkward body around to study her counterpart's jowly face, "but it was good of you to arrange with Starco to bring me."

Francis M. Nevins's connection to *EQMM* goes all the way back to Fred Dannay (a.k.a. Ellery Queen). *EQMM*'s first editor served as a mentor to the young Mr. Nevins, and Mr. Nevins has become one of the foremost authorities on the work of Ellery Queen. *The Sound of Detection*, the latest Nevins scholarly work, which deals with the long-running Ellery Queen radio series, came out in late 2002. He returns to fiction here, and one of his series characters, Gene Holt. †

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"Not a problem," Nodella replied. "Starco's vital to the regional economy, and I don't have to tell you the general was a legend at Starco." He paused and cleared his throat as the sedan swerved into a two-lane blacktop that thrust between tracts of lush woodland. "I, ah, know a little about you and the general, like how you and his daughter were buddies in college, but it might help if I knew more before we get to the scene."

You'll never know more about it than you need to know, she said to herself.

He was the only man in her life. They first met when she was in college and Lynn Anderson, her roommate and dearest friend, had brought her back on spring break to meet her widowed father. Paul was a full colonel then, and chief legal adviser to the commandant at Fort Monmouth in New Jersey, near the Atlantic coast. She liked him. Before meeting him she could never have imagined a career soldier who could talk intelligently about art and literature and music and philosophy. She knew that Lynn and her father had never been terribly close, and that the raging Vietnam war had made their relationship worse than ever. Lynn was a firebrand and an activist. She marched against the war; she cheered Jane Fonda's visit to Hanoi, while her mousier roommate kept her subversive thoughts to herself and read literature and went to chamber-music recitals and thought about getting an M.L.S. degree after graduation and then finding a librarian's job in some quiet liberal-arts college. By the time Lynn had vanished, Paul was a brigadier general and commandant of The Judge Advocate General's School in Charlottesville, while she, in the wake of the women's movement, had wound up not a librarian but a plainclothes detective and eventually the newest member of her city's Major Case Squad. By that time, Paul had left the military and become CEO at Starco, shaping that corporate colossus as a potter shapes moist clay until, on his seventy-fifth birthday, he retired. That was when he had begun calling her.

Two or three times a year, usually late in the evening, she would receive a phone call inviting her for a visit, and in the morning she would arrange for some leave time, and a few days later she would take a cab to the private airport on the edge of the county where a Starco jet would be waiting. She would be flown four hundred miles diagonally across the state to another private airfield where the jet would touch down and a cab would be waiting to take her along two-lane blacktops through gently rolling hills to a high flagstone wall that bore the sign STARCO CONFERENCE CENTER. There was a golf course on the left side of the road, tennis courts and the starting points of hiking trails on the right, and eventually the cab would stop under the porte-cochere and a

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conference-center attendant would take her bag and lead her along a walkway through densely forested hills to the long low house in the center of a clearing in the woods where one could almost imagine the world could not intrude. Paul would be waiting for her at the door with his shock of white hair and wild thatchy eyebrows and thick cane and they would hug and she would stay there with him for three or four days during which they would play chess or Scrabble before the vast fireplace in the central room and talk about music and literature and the world and quietly mourn his lost daughter and sip wine and watch old movies on a DVD player that was connected to a video projector so that the images were almost as large as in a regular theater. Her visits had been the brightest part of her life for more than a dozen years now, but recently she had found herself wondering how much longer they could go on. Wouldn't he soon be ninety?

The county car wove past a huge and all-but-empty parking lot. "They've just finished a major remodeling job," Nodella explained. "The place won't be open to groups again till the first of next month, but there's a skeleton staff on duty and Starco's putting you up here gratis." He pronounced the last word *graytis*. "For now, we're treating the general's house as a crime scene, so you can't stay there."

The gum-chewing driver braked under the porte-cochere and Nodella scrambled out ahead of her to open the massive wooden entrance door of the conference center. Inside the vaulted atrium she peered around as if she had never seen the place before. "Lieutenant Holt," Nodella told the double-chinned blond woman behind the registration counter. A slight young man with hair dark as midnight and the nametag JORGE above the breast pocket of his white mess jacket materialized from nowhere. After a whispered colloquy with Nodella, he took her bag and led the way to the elevator and pressed the button for the lower level. Once there, he stopped at a large corner room with a glass rectangle in its door, unlocked it with a key from a ring in his hand, switched on the overhead fluorescents. It was designed for small group meetings: clusters of leather chairs and couches, low tables, unobtrusive art prints on the paneled walls. "Mr. Nodella say he'll talk with you in here. You should phone front desk when you like him to come down." Leaving the door ajar, he led her down a cross corridor to another door, this one without a window in it, and keyed it open and set her bag down. While she was fumbling in her purse for a tip, he took a few steps back with his palm raised. "No, no," he said. "No money. The general, he was good man, and you were his friend." He eased out of the room and closed the door gently between them.

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"Doesn't it remind you of Robert Frost?" she asked an hour later in the small meeting room.

"What, this room? Georgie said it was a good place for us to powwow, but I don't see . . . " Nodella looked blankly around him, reminding her once again of the sad state of the younger generation's cultural literacy. Her inner nanny nagged at her to make a sweetly cutting comment, like, "The name is pronounced Hor-hay, you poor dear," but she repressed the urge and opted for something kinder.

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood," she said, hoping against hope that the quotation wouldn't be Greek to him. Two roads, two scenarios: suicide or murder? They didn't know yet which road they should take, so like good detectives they would try to travel both at once.

The evidence so far seemed inconclusive. Paul's body had been found when the waiter, a young man from India whose multisyllabic name Nodella had turned into hash, had come over from the conference center bringing the general's usual breakfast on a wheeled serving cart. From Nodella's description and the reports he had given her to read, she could visualize the scene as clearly as if she had found the body herself. Paul slumped over the desk in his study, a half-empty bottle of Bushmill's Black Bush and a thermos bucket of ice cubes on the wet bar across the room, tumbler with residue of the Irish whiskey upset on the carpet at his feet. No suicide note. Nothing on the desk but his will.

"You're sure he was prepared to commit suicide under the right circumstances?" Nodella asked.

"He was something of an old Roman," she told him. "He wanted to go neatly and without pain. Although I don't think he would ever have slit his veins in the tub like some of them did. More like the old Greeks, perhaps." *Socrates,* she thought. *Hemlock.* "He never learned how to use a computer, but even without going online it's not hard to learn the best combination of pills."

"And I found a stash of them in his house," Nodella said, "and the medical examiner found them in him. But that doesn't prove he took them himself. Somebody else could have taken them from his stash or brought their own. We don't know how many he had to begin with. Like you said, two roads through the woods. First road: He decides it's time, takes the pills with the booze, and sits down and waits to die. Second road: Someone drops in for a nightcap with him, laces the general's with the pills, hangs around for him to die, then cleans up so it looks like he died alone. The gates are locked and a security guard comes on at eleven every night, but it's only a short walk to the house from the service road behind the property and we've already found some cronies of the general who knew about it. So how do we decide which is the right

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road? One thing we do is look at motive. You knew the general was worth a bunch of money, right?"

"Yes," she admitted. "And we talked once or twice about what would happen to it after he died. He wanted to leave much of it to me. I begged him not to."

"And he talked with you about the mess at Madison University, right? That being his alma mater and a couple of hours' drive from your bailiwick."

"Naturally," she said. "He was furious at Mad U. Apoplectic."

Paul had gone to law school on the GI Bill after World War II and before being recalled to active duty for Korea. He had made the military his life but retained a great fondness for old Mad U and, once convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that Lynn was dead, had set up his estate plan so that after his death the bulk of his property would be left in trust to Mad U to fund one or more chairs in international law. Then, at the height of the 1990s political-correctness boom, Mad U Law School had made its stand against the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding gays and lesbians by banning recruiters from the Judge Advocate General's offices of the various armed services from interviewing students on its property. The law school had been forced to reverse itself only when Congress threatened to retaliate by denying all government grants to any part of Madison University. That brouhaha had made Paul angry enough, but it was like a puff of smoke in comparison with his fury only months before his death. For twenty years, the law school's policy had been to forgive the student loans of those who after graduation opted for low-paying public-service jobs. Less than six months after 9/11, the law faculty had voted by the narrowest of margins to deny access to its Loan Repayment Assistance Program to any graduates who accepted commissions in JAG.

"Paul called the dean at Mad U," she said. "He gave them a month to change their policy, otherwise he said he'd cut the law school out of his will. He told me about it a few weeks ago. It was—the last time I spoke with him."

"Well, we know what the law school did," Nodella said. "Dean Corrigan sent his associate dean down here to try to reason with the general. Guy named Mark Stern. I get the sense his main job is keeping potential donors happy. He's staying here at the conference center. Checked in the night before last. He told me he saw the general yesterday morning and was supposed to see him again today."

"Something's wrong with that picture," she said. "He agrees to see this man, arranges a room for him here, meets with him once, then kills himself the night before their second meeting? That isn't the Paul I knew."

"You might see it as a suicide that was timed to sort of give Mad U a dope slap," Nodella suggested. "Especially when you connect it

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with the changes he made in his will before he killed himself."

"You didn't tell me about any changes," she said. Nodella said nothing. "Do you mean that he revoked the bequest to Mad U before he took those pills?" Nodella still said nothing. "But you said 'changes,'" she added then. "More than one?"

"Three, if you include the codicil." Nodella rummaged in the slender attaché case at his feet, pulled out a sheaf of blue-backed papers, and extracted one document which he handed her. "These are photocopies, of course, the originals are evidence." She peered through her bifocals at the single page. "That dates back to a year and a half ago," Nodella explained. "When he changed executors."

"I see," she murmured. "From Joseph W. Dengler to Joseph W. Dengler, Jr." She had a vague recollection of Paul explaining to her at the time. Dengler senior, who was Paul's protégé at Starco and about twenty years younger, had become CEO when Paul retired. Two years ago he had contracted brain tumors and gone into an assisted-living facility. His son had taken over as Starco's CEO and Paul had substituted the son as executor of his own estate.

"Not that that has any bearing on what happened yesterday," Nodella told her. "But here." He handed her the much thicker sheaf of papers he had taken from the attaché case. "This is a photocopy of the will itself. This has one hell of a bearing on what happened."

She took the document and held it close to her eyes. It seemed a perfectly proper, formally executed will, dated several years ago. There were several pages of relatively small bequests to various charities and acquaintances, then, just above Paul's signature and those of the witnesses, a paragraph leaving most of his estate in trust to Madison University for the purpose of creating one or more chairs in International Law. The first words of the operative sentence—"The rest, residue, and remainder of my estate I bequeath to"—remained intact on the page. Lines had been drawn through every word after those, lines so straight and precise she knew they must have been drawn with the help of a ruler. In the space left after the end of the original sentence she saw two words, handwritten. Words that made her blink in disbelief.

Jean Holt.

She felt faint. There was a whistling noise like an angry teakettle in her head. "This is insane," she protested. "He could never have . . ." The whistling was replaced by an insidious little voice inside her saying, *You're rich you're rich, nothing can hurt you again,* and she began to tremble.

Nodella's voice broke into her roiling thoughts. "The pen that seems to have made the changes was found on his desk."

She pressed her lips together, forced herself to function like a professional. "Paul didn't write this," she said, handing the document back to him.

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"Both Jody Dengler and the head of the legal department at Starco tell me it looks like his handwriting," Nodella said.

"I don't care a damn what they tell you!" She dug into the purse on the carpet at her feet, hauled out her badge case, and thrust it at him. "Look! Look!" She removed from various compartments of her wallet her Social Security card, credit cards, AAA card, library card, membership cards in the art museum and the botanical garden and the chamber-concert society. Nodella's thick brows lifted as he scanned them.

"My birth name is Eugenia Holt," she said. "I've gone by Gene—G-E-N-E—since I was a girl. Don't tell me Paul forgot how to spell my name! Whoever made this change in the will, it wasn't Paul."

"You visited the general here regularly," Nodella pointed out, and Gene reluctantly nodded. "You knew his feelings about suicide. It wouldn't have been hard for you to find out where he kept his pills and his will. I'm told his residuary estate is worth around seven million dollars. You're human just like everyone else. Let's suppose for a moment that you were tempted. Write your name into the will, feed the general either his own suicide pills or duplicates you got hold of yourself, and you're rich. Of course, being a detective and, I'm told, a damn good one, you would have known that you'd come under suspicion. You might have thought to divert those suspicions by misspelling your own name. Legally I don't think the wrong spelling would stop you from claiming under the will. Umm—can you prove where you were yesterday evening?"

The question made Gene feel shamed and violated—gave her a sudden swift insight into the feelings of the countless suspects she had questioned in her years with the Major Case Squad. Many of them were innocent, too, under suspicion because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time or had said the wrong thing to the wrong person. "As chance would have it," she replied, "I can. I was at the retirement banquet for the man who until very recently was my boss. At the head table on a dais, in plain view of the mayor, the chief of police, and approximately two hundred fellow officers. I gave a little speech." She cleared her throat. "Is that alibi enough for you?" she asked meekly.

"You could still have hired it done," Nodella said. But Gene saw an impish gleam in his eyes that told her he wasn't serious, that he was playing a cop game. Then, suddenly, he seemed to tire of the sport. "Oh hell, I know you didn't," he said. "You might have been tempted to change his will if you happened to come across it, but if I read you right, that's the limit. Prudence is your middle name. Anderson was in his late eighties and in poor health. You wouldn't have killed him and risked everything, you would have sat back and waited for nature to take its course."

Gene was far from certain that this was a compliment, but she

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felt the tension between them seem to vanish in an instant and her mind began working again. *But why would someone else change Paul's will that way?* she asked herself. *Do I have a secret psychotic admirer who decided I should be a rich lady?* The instant the question was formed in her mind she answered it. *No. Couldn't be. Too much like a TV Movie of the Week.*

Nodella grunted and lifted his bulk out of the deep leather chair, then offered a hand to help Gene out of the depths of her own. "Come on," he said. "We have time for a bite before our evening appointment. I'm buying. You like falafel?"

Almost before she knew it, the two of them were in the center of the city and bolting a quick supper at the Al-Tarboush deli around the corner from police headquarters. Then they drove out in Nodella's official sedan to the other end of town and passed a security checkpoint. They parked in an all but empty lot and walked along broad pathways through a setting whose twilight serenity reminded her of an idealized college campus, dotted with flowerbeds and ponds and statuary. Just beyond a clock tower surrounded by jetting waters Nodella turned into a three-story red-brick building with LAW CENTER over the entranceway and a security guard who unlocked the door for them as soon as Nodella displayed his badge case. "Law library's on the second floor," the guard told them. "Mr. Dengler and Mr. Foley and the judge got here a few minutes ago."

When the elevator door slid back on the second floor, a slender blond man in a cashmere suit signaled to them from across the corridor. Gene guessed his age as early forties. There was a look of smug and somehow perverse power about him. In a drama about Roman history, he might have been cast as Caligula. "Th-this way," he said, and opened the door behind him. "Y-you must be L-Lieutenant N-Nodella." The stutter altered Gene's perception of him, made him seem not so much a Caligula figure as a Claudius. He held out his hand to the guests. "I'm J-Jody Dengler."

Nodella introduced Gene, and they followed the supreme poohbah of the Starco empire into a vast room surrounded by shelves full of law tomes and dominated by a rosewood conference table which could seat twenty people comfortably even if they each had a pile of books beside them. At the moment, only two people were sitting there: a bald, sharkskin-suited man of about fifty with the smell of pipe tobacco about him and a black woman roughly the same age who wore her gray-streaked hair in a pixie cut. She closed the hefty green-bound volume in front of her and beat the bald man to his feet as the three approached. "Lieutenant Holt," Nodella said, "The Honorable Artemisia Wellston, probate judge of this county. I got to know the judge last year," he

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explained to Gene, "when my mom died and we had to probate her will." Gene shook her hand.

"Alex Foley," the bald man introduced himself in a deep baritone. "Starco general counsel."

"J-Judge W-W-Wellston has agreed to c-confer with us about Gen-General Anderson's w-w-will," Jody Dengler explained as all five took seats.

"Hypothetically only," the jurist cautioned. "The will has not been offered for probate yet, and I cannot give an opinion on any matter that I might have to officially rule upon a few months from now." She sat and folded her hands on the gleaming table surface. "Show me the will, sweetie," she said.

Gene and Nodella sat in silence at her right and Dengler and Foley at her left as she read the document. A few minutes into her perusal she began to react, shaking her head slightly as if in disapproval, murmuring, "Uh-uh, uh-uh," as if it were the strangest paragraph she had ever encountered. She set the will down and folded her hands again. "Someone's got troubles here," she said.

"On this side of the table we're just cops, Your Honor, not lawyers," Nodella said. "I'd appreciate it if you could explain in layman's, er, layperson's language."

"That's simple enough," Judge Wellston said. "Now this will, this hypothetical will, I should say, seems to comply in all respects with the formal requirements for a valid will. Signed by the testator, proper number of witnesses, et cetera. Was General Anderson of sound mind when he executed it? Are there any issues of testamentary incapacity or undue influence? Of course, from the will itself there is no way I or anyone else can tell." She cleared her throat. "The problem here is what happened to this will after he executed it. I am to assume he made these changes himself?"

"You can assume that for our purposes here," Nodella said.

"Well, let's take the earliest first." She looked up from the will into the ice-gray eyes of Jody Dengler. "Eighteen months ago, when he changed executors from your father to you. No legal problem there, but you should all thank your lucky stars he didn't die within thirty days of making that change." Dengler and Foley nodded slightly as if they knew what she was talking about, but Gene and Nodella looked blank. "Any codicil to a will," she explained, looking at the nonlawyers in the room now, "has an effect on the will that we call republication. This means that all words and concepts of time that apply to the will are sort of moved forward from the date the will was executed to the date the codicil was executed. With me so far? Now this is our probate code." She tapped the green-bound book in front of her. "One of its provisions was designed to prevent religious and other scoundrels from terrorizing people on their deathbeds into leaving money to their group. It

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invalidates any charitable bequest in a will if the person dies within thirty days of executing the will. Now, if you'll connect the dots between that and what I said about republication . . ."

Nodella at least made the connection. "The thirty-day clock started running again from the date he signed the codicil changing executors?"

"Very good! Maybe you should consider going to law school. If General Anderson had died within a month of executing that codicil, the residuary clause of his will would have been invalidated and all that money would have gone by intestate succession."

Gene cast her thoughts back. Wasn't it just about eighteen months ago that Paul had flown to Europe? Yes, he had talked to her on the phone a few days before leaving; said he wanted to revisit the places he'd been stationed while he was still able to travel. He must have changed executors very shortly before his departure. Well, Gene told herself, in any event he came back and survived the execution of that codicil by far more than thirty days.

"Now for the changes in his will he apparently made just before his death," Judge Wellston continued. "First, he drew a line through the original residuary bequest. That would seem to constitute a valid partial revocation of his will." She smiled at Gene. "You see, sweetie, executing a valid will requires certain formalities, but revoking a will, in whole or in part, is much simpler." She leafed through the green-bound tome until she found what she needed. "Under our law and the laws of every other state I am familiar with, you can revoke a will in whole or in part by physical act. Each state's probate code has—well, you might call it a laundry list of the physical acts that count. In this state the acts are burning, canceling, tearing, or obliterating. If any of those acts is done either by the testator or in his presence and by his consent and direction, it counts as revocation. Of course, you also need *animus revocandi.*" She stopped and emitted a low giggle. "Oh, I'm sorry, I promised no law talk, didn't I? That just means the act must have been done with the intent to revoke. Assuming those requirements were met, General Anderson revoked the residuary clause of his will. The body of his will would be given legal effect, but the residuary would pass by intestate succession."

"But, Judge," Nodella protested, "remember that after the general lined out the original residuary clause, he wrote in Ms. Holt's name."

"I do remember," Wellston assured him. "Ms. Holt takes nothing. You see, holographic wills and holographic codicils aren't recognized in this state. You can revoke a will or any part of a will without witnesses, but you do need them to add new matter to a will. This handwritten addition to the will was not attested. The general may have intended Ms. Holt to be the new residuary legatee,

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but he did not comply with our Probate Code. The residue of his estate will go to his intestate successors, which means to his nearest relatives within the ninth degree of kinship as determined by the civil-law method of counting. My oh my, there I go again! Sorry, sweetie," she said to Gene.

"Paul had a daughter," Gene said, "but she vanished back in the 'seventies." Softly, and without mentioning aspects that were too personal, she explained to the judge her college friendship with Lynn and how it had led to her friendship with Paul.

"He was always hoping she'd come back," Alex Foley said. "I remember that several months before he retired from Starco he hired a big private detective firm to try and find her. The search took more than a year. Jody, didn't your dad put you in charge of supervising the detectives when he took over as CEO?"

"Th-that's right, Al-Alex," the younger Dengler said. "It was a w-waste of time and m-money. A c-court declared her legally d-dead about f-f-fifteen years ago and th-that was wh-when the g-general had the w-will drawn up that left m-most of his estate to M-Mad U."

"He had no other relatives?" Judge Wellston asked. "Brothers, sisters, cousins?"

At that moment a horrible scenario sprang full-grown into Gene's mind. *Lynn is alive. She's around here somewhere incognito. She fed Paul his suicide pills and monkeyed with his will so that the seven-million-dollar residue would wind up hers.* She struggled to keep her face and voice neutral as she answered the judge's question. "He was an only child. I never heard him mention any relatives."

"No adopted children?" the judge asked. "They're treated the same as biological children for succession purposes, you know."

"He never adopted any children," Gene said. *If Lynn is around somewhere, would I know her after thirty years? Would she know me?*

"If there are no relatives within the ninth degree of kindred, the residue goes to the state," the judge said. "Hypothetically, of course. That is known as escheat. Unless—well, there is another legal concept that may come into play here if Madison University wants to bet on a long shot."

"Are we in for more lawyer talk?" Nodella asked glumly, and at the judge's nod he and Gene grimaced at each other and reached for legal pads from the stack at the center of the table.

She slept poorly that night. Distant thunder rumbling in the mountains, thoughts churning in her head. Alternative accounts of Paul's death and the changes in his will, versions that required her to turn on the bedside lamp and reread the notes she'd taken as Judge Wellston lectured. After a while, when she realized how

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deeply she was engrossed in the technique of legal analysis, she shuddered like Lon Chaney, Jr. when he saw himself turning into a werewolf, but she didn't stop thinking. Finally she drifted into a fitful doze, waking with a start to find her room flooded with sunlight. She bathed and dressed and went up to the main floor and the registration kiosk, behind which the double-chinned blonde who had checked her in sat at a computer terminal. *Could that be Lynn?* Gene turned away and entered the dining room, which opened off the lobby and was bereft of patrons except for one man tackling an omelet in an alcove. She recognized the attendant who escorted her to a window table and took her order as the same young man who had taken her bag yesterday. Jorge brought her orange juice and hot tea with lemon and, a few minutes later, a basket of muffins. She had just finished spreading marmalade on one of them when she saw the man across the dining room push his chair back and saunter casually in her direction as though he had seen a deer through the window and wanted a closer look. "Ms. Holt, I presume?"

"I'm Lieutenant Holt," she corrected him gently.

"We do seem to have the place to ourselves." He smiled. "I'm Mark Stern." He reached for a card case in his hip pocket.

"I thought you might be," she said without looking at the card. "You're the associate dean at Mad U School of Law, yes?"

"Precisely. So you're the lucky lady whose name was written in as residuary legatee in General Anderson's will."

How did you come to know that? Gene wondered. The fact was not included in what Nodella had released to the media. Her best guess was that Mad U had some kind of pipeline into either the Department or Judge Wellston's chambers. "Well, yes," she replied, hoping to test how good a pipeline he had, "but not by General Anderson."

"Er, well, hmm-hmm," Stern coughed, "I imagine it will be our position that it was."

Gene needed no more to sense the drift of the conversation. Her mind went back to Judge Wellston's impromptu lecture of the evening before. "Oh, I see," she said. "Mad U is going to argue Dependent Relative Revocation. I'm familiar with the doctrine," she went on brightly. "If a testator revokes a bequest in his will and replaces it with another that after his death is held to be invalid, his revocation is deemed to have been contingent on the efficacy of the substitute and, that contingency having failed, the revocation is disregarded."

Associate Dean Stern's jaw dropped and he stared goggle-eyed at her as if she were the Medusa, with legalisms rather than snakes coming out of her mouth. Gene half-rose in her chair and signaled to Jorge across the dining room.

"There are two reasons why the plan won't work." She seated

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herself again as the young waiter approached her table. "One of them is legal. The majority of courts apply the doctrine only where doing so seems in line with what the testator would have preferred. In this case, that clearly isn't so."

"And the other reason?" Stern asked.

"Jorge," Gene said, "I want you to listen carefully to what we say." The waiter gave her a look of polite blankness and positioned himself warily between the standing man and the seated woman. "Spell my name," she told the associate dean, and glowed with delight when she saw a frown of puzzlement etch his brow.

"H-O-L-T," he replied. "I guess."

"And my first name?"

He hesitated for perhaps three seconds. "J-E-A-N," he ventured.

"I hoped you'd say that." Gene reached into her clutch bag, extracted badge case and wallet, and displayed the same cards she had shown Nodella the day before. "That is how it was spelled in the handwritten addition to Paul's will. Now Paul knew me for more than half my life. He knew how to spell my name. Whoever added my name to his will spelled it wrong—precisely as you just did!"

Stern's complexion went dead-fish gray. He began to sway as he stood over her and for a moment Gene was afraid he'd keel over. Jorge stepped back in alarm.

"You were staying here at the conference center the night Paul died," she went on. "Suppose, for whatever reason, you slipped out and over to his house that night, and discovered him dead, and saw the will on his desk with the residuary bequest to Mad U lined out? Now you, sir, are responsible for buttering up potential donors to the law school. That means you probably knew a little bit about Paul's relationship with me. Suddenly the words Dependent Relative Revocation flash into your legal mind. You take Paul's pen and write my name in as close to his style of handwriting as you can. But you had the bad luck to spell it wrong."

"I didn't . . . " he gasped. "I didn't. . . . "

"Perhaps not." Gene smiled. "But can you prove you didn't? Whoever is on the other side of the lawsuit you have in mind, whether it's I, or the state, or someone else—well, you can be sure I'll testify to this little interlude between us, and Jorge here will confirm it."

Stern turned on his heel and stalked out of the dining room, without waiting for his check and leaving the rest of his omelet uneaten. Gene felt a warm serenity inside her. It wasn't every day that one had the chance to out-lawyer a lawyer.

Crossing the atrium on the way back to her room, she paused for another unobtrusive look at the double-chinned blonde behind the registration counter. *No way,* she told herself. The lean and dynamic Lynn she remembered from college could never have morphed into this pudgy frump. But what if . . . She cleared her throat

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loudly and the blonde looked up from her computer terminal.

"Excuse me." Gene took the badge case out of her bag and held it open. "I'm working with Lieutenant Nodella on General Anderson's death. Would you happen to have a list of the conference center employees?"

"Certainly, ma'am," the blonde said. She slipped into an office inside the registration area and returned with a roster of several dozen names, which she handed across the counter. "Only the ones with asterisks next to them are working this month," she said. "The rest were furloughed while we were doing renovations."

Gene counted eleven names with asterisks and recognized a few of them from the interview reports Nodella had shared with her. JONES, DEMETRIUS was the night security guard on the front gate. NARAYAN, RADHAKRISHNAN was the waiter who had found Paul's body. SOTO, JORGE had just served her breakfast in the restaurant. Some of the unfamiliar names on the roster were foreign and she couldn't be sure of their gender. "How many of these are women?" she asked.

Frowning as if she feared Gene might be a compliance officer with the EEOC, the blonde took the roster and returned it with red pen marks beside four names. "The one at the top is me," she said.

"And the other three—would you say any of them are, well, in my own age bracket?"

The clerk laughed. "They're all young enough to be our daughters." Gene silently buried the Lynn-is-among-us theory in the well-stocked boneyard of her speculations, thanked the other woman, and turned away.

Halfway across the atrium she froze in her tracks and for a moment her heart stopped. She was Prince Gautama under the bo tree, she was Newton watching the apple fall, she was Beethoven touching piano keys to produce the first notes of the Fifth Symphony. *It all fits! It all rhymes!* With stoic calm, she took the elevator down to her room, sat on the unmade bed for a while as silent and motionless as a statue, then reached for the stenographic pad she had used the previous evening and began filling the clean pages with fresh notes. At one point she stopped, found the local phone directory in a night-table drawer, tapped out the Probate Court number, and was lucky enough to find Judge Wellston free. She asked three questions, received the answers she had expected, hung up, and wrote on her steno pad some more. Then she reached for the phone again and called Nodella's extension.

"Come see me," she said. "I need your undivided attention for an hour or two."

Nodella stopped pacing Gene's room and dropped to the edge of her still-unmade bed. "I can't believe it," he muttered. "My God, it

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goes back so far!"

"If I'm right," she said, "it goes back to Paul's last months as CEO of Starco, when he decided to make one final all-out effort to find Lynn. Remember what Mr. Foley told us last night? Paul gave Dengler senior the job of hiring and supervising detectives. When Paul retired and Dengler senior took over as CEO, he delegated the job to his son."

"Yes, but the detectives struck out," Nodella reminded her. "And the general gave up and had his daughter declared legally dead. That was what, fifteen years ago?"

"You have no idea what those detectives found and neither do I," Gene said. "If my theory is right, they either didn't find Lynn at all or found evidence she was dead, but they also found something else. *That she had either had or adopted a child.* Remember what Judge Wellston said last night? Biological and adopted children are treated the same for succession purposes. So Paul had a grandchild but didn't know it. He planned his estate so that most of it would go to fund chairs of international law at Mad U. But meanwhile, Jody Dengler had made some kind of devil's bargain with the grandchild that would put those millions into their pockets if they played their cards right and were lucky.

"What happens next? Dengler senior contracts an incurable disease and Jody takes over as CEO. In due course, Paul has a codicil added to his will, replacing the older Dengler as executor with the younger. Now, suppose Paul had happened to die within thirty days of executing that codicil."

Nodella rubbed his chin and scowled.

"Judge Wellston told us last night," Gene said. "The Probate Code's restriction on charitable bequests would have kicked in and the residuary, meaning the vast bulk of Paul's estate, would have passed by intestate succession to his nearest relative within the ninth degree of kinship. *The grandchild he never knew he had!"*

"Well, but nothing happened to the general within thirty days after he changed executors," Nodella pointed out.

"Only because almost immediately after signing the codicil he took off for a long trip to Europe! That happenstance added a year and a half to Paul's life and frustrated Jody's scheme. But he didn't give up. He sat back and ran Starco and waited for another opportunity. Which was offered to him recently when Mad U adopted the anti-military policy that sent Paul up the wall with anger so that he threatened to cut the school out of his will. Now I knew Paul for a long time and he was not a man to make idle threats. I don't know whether he did it before his meeting with Mark Stern or after, but I'm convinced that he lined out that residuary clause himself—and that he told Jody Dengler. Can you imagine Jody's ecstasy when he heard the news? Now if Paul would only die

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before he decided on a new residuary legatee, the residue would pass by intestacy to his unknown grandchild, just as it would have if he'd died within thirty days after changing executors! And this time Paul obliged—with a great deal of help from Jody."

Nodella was silent for a few minutes, then looked up. "It's a beautiful theory," he admitted. "You can't prove a word of it, but it seems to account for everything we know . . ."

"And just before you came out here, Judge Wellston confirmed that the legal steps of it are sound," Gene cut in.

"Except for one little thing," Nodella went on. "The will we found wasn't the way it needed to be for this scheme to pay off. Your name, misspelled, was handwritten in as the residuary legatee! Now why, after killing the general, would Dengler have done that?"

"He would have been insane to do it," Gene agreed. "Therefore, he didn't. Paul must have written in my name himself, probably while Jody was busy cleaning up the evidence of his visit. He was dying, he knew he'd been poisoned, he sensed that the reason must be connected with his having canceled the Mad U clause in his will, so he wrote in my name. Not knowing it was legally invalid."

"And misspelling it?"

"I think he meant that as, well, as a signal to me that there was something amiss about his death." Gene rose from her chair and Nodella from the edge of her bed. "Let's go see if we can find some evidence." She held the room door open and shut it behind them. "We need to locate the reports of the agency that was hired to trace Lynn. Then we'll see the head of the agency and demand copies of all their files on the case and we look for gaps. We'll interview all the investigators who worked on the case. If someone found a biological or adopted child of Lynn's and took a bribe to keep it under wraps, they might prefer to talk rather than be charged as accessory before the fact in a murder."

"So where do we begin?" he asked. "If you're right, and if we go to Starco and ask to see those detectives' reports, Dengler's going to know we're getting warm."

"The subject of those reports was Paul's daughter," Gene said. "He would never have kept them at Starco after he retired and probably not even while he worked there. He must have kept them somewhere in his house. And that's excellent because the place is sealed off as a crime scene, and unless Dengler managed to find them when he poisoned Paul, there's no way he can make them disappear now. Come on, let's start looking."

She had walked this paved footpath so many times before, through twilight shadows when she and Paul would stroll over for dinner at the conference center, through the night songs of cicadas and toads when they would return home. With Nodella as her

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companion, the pace was much faster. Once beyond the conference center, the path curved through thick woods that shut out most of the sunlight. The only sounds she heard were their footsteps. Then, off in the woods, she heard something else. A thrashing and a soft moaning. Nodella held up his hand for them to stop.

"A deer?" she whispered.

"I'm a hunter," he told her. "That's no deer. Wait." He stepped off the path and into the woods, slowly, cautiously. In less than a minute she lost sight of him amid the trees. Then she heard him cry out her name. "Over here!" he shouted. "Careful where you step!" She made her way around sprawling roots, following his voice until, at the edge of a clearing, she saw him. On his knees. Bending over another man who was lying in a twisted position on his side. Even in the gloom, she could see the blood all over his clothes. Nodella slowly rose, looked around as if to make sure he wasn't disturbing anything, then came close to her. "Dengler," he breathed. "Stabbed five or six times. I think he just died in my arms, but I'm not a doctor. Damn, I left my cell phone in the car!"

"Oh God," Gene said. "Did he say anything before he died?"

"I asked him who did it."

"And?"

Nodella looked stunned and shaken, as if his best friend had just punched him in the solar plexus.

"He laughed in my face!"

They trotted back to Nodella's sedan in the conference-center parking lot. With his cell phone he ordered the officer on duty at Paul's house to secure the new crime scene, then called in for backup. Gene crossed to the rear entrance of the conference center, found her way to the atrium, spoke to the frumpy blonde behind the registration desk, and came away with the name, address, and phone and license numbers of the murderer. Sirens screamed and tires squealed as two black-and-whites and a boxy EMS truck braked within a few feet of Nodella's car and four plainclothesmen with sidearms and two medical technicians in white with a stretcher emerged from their respective vehicles. Nodella sent them off along the path with preliminary instructions. Gene waited until he was through before she showed him the paper.

"This is who you want," she said.

She looked out the window of Major Case Squad headquarters at the midnight lights of the city below as Nodella thanked the cop at the other end of the line and hung up. It was over. The wild auto chase had begun at a truck stop three counties south and ended forty minutes later in a collision between the murderer's car and an eighteen-wheeler he had thought he could pass at ninety-five

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miles per hour. He had been thrown clear, but with a broken neck and back, and in the emergency hospital he had made two statements, the second to police officers who had taped it and faxed a transcription to Nodella's office while he and Gene were out grabbing a quick supper at al-Tarboush. The first had been to the hospital's chaplain. During the call that had just come in, Nodella had mouthed two words to Gene across the room. "He's dead." Now the lieutenant joined her at the window and gazed out empty-eyed at the light-dotted canyons of downtown.

"I can't get over how quickly you knew," he said after a space of silence.

You would have known, too, if you could pronounce the man's name right, Gene thought but politely declined to say. "It was so easy," she replied instead. "Why would Jody laugh in your face when you asked who had killed him? Well, if this were a detective story I suppose we could come up with some outlandish reason or other, but there's such a simple explanation—*when you remember that he stuttered!* He was trying to say 'Jorge Soto' but just couldn't get beyond the first syllable!"

"And knowing who did it, you right away knew why?"

"Well, there didn't seem to be more than one possibility," Gene said. "Lynn has been dead for years, we know that now, but Jorge is the child she adopted long ago. The detectives found him, but Jody kept the news from Paul and made a private deal with Jorge. The young man came out here a few years ago on what the British would call a watching brief. He took a job at the conference center and spied on Paul as best he could. We know from his statement that he was afraid to come out and tell Paul who he was because then Paul could rewrite his will so as to leave him either nothing or a relative pittance. Jorge was something of a gambler. He was playing for the big jackpot."

"But you don't think he was the one who fed the general his nightcap of hemlock?"

"Paul was a military man," Gene said. "He had a sense of rank. I don't see him offering a tot of his whiskey to a menial. No, it was Dengler who was his last drinking companion. Not that we have to prove him guilty of anything now. Remember, it was Jorge who suggested that meeting room for us yesterday. I think he must have eavesdropped on some of our conversation and learned about my misspelled name having been added to Paul's will. He had no idea what that meant, but he saw his dreams collapsing and hit the panic button and arranged a meeting with Jody in the woods near the conference center. They fought and Jorge killed him and ran. I wouldn't be surprised if he still dreamed of coming back someday to claim Paul's estate on his own. We all have our dreams. So," she finished, "I suppose most of Paul's money will

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wind up escheating to the state."

"Suppose somebody crawls out of the woodwork," Nodella asked, "claiming the estate through Georgie? After all, it wasn't Soto who poisoned the general, so maybe a relative of his could argue . . ."

"In that unlikely event," Gene said, stifling a wince at Nodella's rendition of the name, "I expect the state would try to show Jorge was somehow complicit in Paul's murder in a way that would bar any relative of his from profiting from the crime. And it would be a civil proceeding, so the state would only need to prevail by a simple preponderance of the evidence, not beyond a reasonable doubt."

"Are you sure you're not a lawyer?" Nodella scowled.

She gazed unseeing out the Plexiglas window of the Starco jet at cloud wisps in a bright blue sky. Alex Foley and the gray-bearded black man who had been appointed acting CEO sat in their dark suits across the aisle from her, heads bent close, talking business in low voices drowned out for her by the plane motors. They were on their way back from seeing Paul laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. For want of any family member in the party, the folded flag had been given to her at the ceremony's end. That and a flood of memories was all she had of him now. If she had played her cards differently with him, what would she be today? His widow, perhaps? Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and part of her knew she had taken the one right for her and part of her wished she had taken the one she hadn't.

Never again, the jet's motors seemed to hum. *Never again.* ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

S	E	A	S	■	M	A	M	A	S	■	A	L	A	N
L	A	S	T	■	E	P	O	C	H	■	S	O	D	A
A	R	I	A	■	A	R	A	C	A	■	I	G	O	R
P	L	A	C	E	S	I	N	T	H	E	D	A	R	K
■	■	■	C	A	L	L	S	■	■	R	E	N	E	S
A	T	E	A	S	E	■	■	S	A	N	S	■	■	■
C	A	R	T	E	■	E	D	E	R	■	■	Y	A	M
T	H	E	O	L	D	D	A	R	K	H	O	U	S	E
S	A	C	■	■	A	N	N	E	■	E	N	R	O	L
■	■	■	D	O	R	A	■	■	A	N	O	I	N	T
A	L	L	E	N	■	■	S	A	T	I	N	■	■	■
V	O	I	C	E	S	I	N	T	H	E	D	A	R	K
A	N	T	I	■	E	L	I	T	E	■	A	L	A	I
N	E	R	D	■	A	L	D	A	N	■	G	E	T	S
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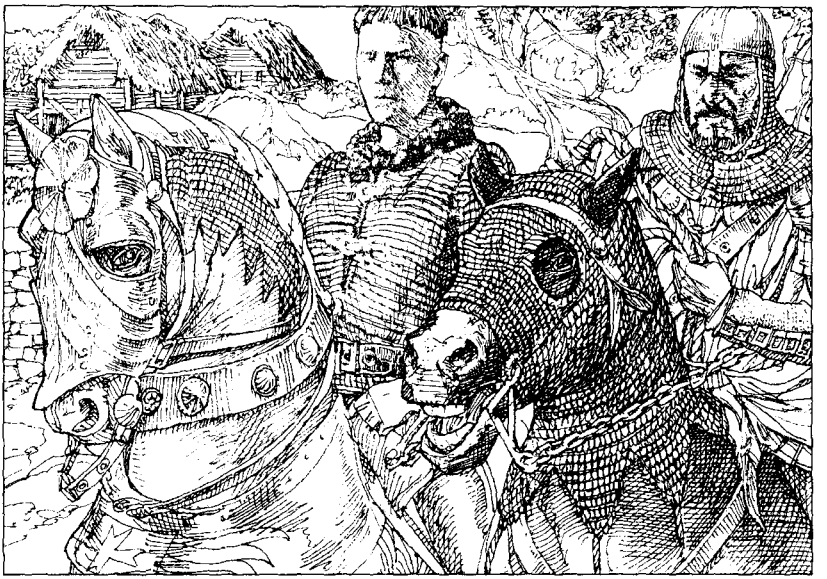

Art by Allen Davis

LIVING WITH THE GILT

by Judith Cutler

Simon de Rougemont reined in his horse the better to gaze with pleasure upon his newly acquired domain. It was his reward for services rendered to William the Bastard. Every prospect pleased: the rich pastures, the wooded slopes teeming, no doubt, with game, and the glittering river promising fine fishing. And the settlement, of course. He sighed: Only man, in the form of his reluctant tenantry, was vile.

Beside him, Claude Villeneuve, the interpreter foisted on him by necessity, sniffed audibly. "To think that they call this a village!" Claude's finger led his lord's eye to the cluster of low wooden huts, reed-thatched, from the roofs of which smoke meandered through more orifices than the builder had presumably intended. "Animals!" the young man added tersely. "In fact, worse than animals, which know no better."

Simon raised a minatory hand. "Only think how much greater will be the joys of civilising them. First of all, we will build a church worthy of the name of the Almighty. And then we will introduce them to a proper legal system—"

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"Fortifying your castle is the best way of civilising those beasts."

Simon chose to ignore the interruption. Somehow this invasion—no, this just retrieval of lands willed to William—had contrived to bring to the fore men who would never in earlier days have achieved any prominence. Some of his fellow barons were behaving in the most ungodly ways, in the interests, they insisted, of the rapid subugation of their English cousins. To Simon's mind, they were little better—and sometimes regrettably worse—than the savage Saxons whose confiscated fiefdoms they had been granted.

Author of twenty books already published in the U.K., Judith Cutler made her U.S. debut in 2003 with the novel *Power on Her Own* (St. Martin's Press), featuring her contemporary series sleuth Kate Power. Ms. Cutler's *EQMM* stories have so far been non-series historicals, this latest one set in 11th-century England, where conquering Normans find that behaving unjustly toward the local people can be dangerous. ¶

"Not just wooden palisades," Villeneuve continued. "Good stone walls. The sort of building to show who's boss." He dropped his whip ostentatiously. "Oy! You. You there!" He slipped off his right glove to click his fingers.

A broad-shouldered man in his early twenties walked unsmilingly, and unhurriedly, towards them. He picked up the whip, reaching up to restore it to Villeneuve's grasp. If he did not expect largesse, he certainly would not have expected the vicious cut across the cheek to which Villeneuve treated him. But he neither flinched nor swore, merely stepping back a pace and regarding his assailant steadily, as if to fix Villeneuve's face in his memory.

"Enough of that," Simon said sharply, as even their escort of soldiers shifted uneasily. "Law enforcement is one thing, brutality another. We are here—"

"I know, to civilise and secure. But they're like dogs, my lord—they need to be shown who's in charge."

"So you say. With undue frequency, if you will permit the observation." Simon raised an acid eyebrow. He was Villeneuve's senior not just in rank but also in age: Why would the wretched man not show him due respect?

Villeneuve was unmoved. "Now, how about that for a game piece?" He pointed with the offending whip at another villager.

"For God's sake, man, can you think with nothing but your fist or your pizzle?"

The young woman in question, though, like all the villagers, thin to the point of emaciation, was extremely pretty, and her shabby, shapeless gown couldn't conceal her magnificent breasts. But her

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occupation declared itself all too clearly as her charges trotted in front of her.

"You'll be forbidding access to the forest, no doubt, my lord?" Villeneuve suggested.

It would be pleasant to believe that Villeneuve had only good husbandry in mind.

"Only if my land-agent recommends it. But there is nothing like pigs for keeping down undergrowth: I welcome them back in my estates in Beaune." He almost expected Villeneuve to protest that those were French porkers, these merely swine. "And remember the pig's nose for truffles."

"I have a nose for something else," Villeneuve declared, swinging down from the saddle, contriving, as he landed in the mud, not to hear his lord's rebuke. He set off briskly after the swineherd, slipping an arm round her to pull her face to his. His free hand was ready to pull her shift from her breast.

Simon swore in exasperation. There was no law to say a soldier couldn't kiss pretty damsels. Kiss and more. It was almost de rigueur. Young men had appetites. And many a girl had a gown to her back and food in her belly she'd have lacked but for the generosity of the man who'd bedded her. But Villeneuve, old enough at twenty-five to know better, didn't differentiate between a supposedly welcome frolic and what was seemly in the confines of the stockade, for example. At least in his lord's sober company, however, he must no doubt show a little restraint.

Simon swore again, but this time with anger. Restraint! Well, if Villeneuve didn't show it, at least the young woman did. Even from where he sat, Simon could see her pull back her hand to strike the face now so offensively close to hers, but hold off from the final blow. Not, Simon thought, from cowardice—though she could have been excused for fearing that she would not strike a conqueror with impunity—but, from the expression on her face, distaste at the prospect of having her wrist captured, as inevitably it would be. However thin and ragged the woman—and what Saxon after the long campaign would be sleek and smart?—and however lowly her function, she possessed a dignity that appealed to the older man, and he spurred his horse forward to deal with Villeneuve. But he was not the only one. One of the pigs, almost as if responding to the girl's choked cry, turned sharply and, head down, charged, its evil little eyes like blazing beads. Villeneuve was too absorbed in extracting a kiss to notice. But the young man who might have been expected to relish a terrible injury to the Norman stepped swiftly forward, bringing down the haft of his axe hard enough to stun the pig in mid charge. It reeled drunkenly away. Simon dismounted, elbowing Villeneuve sharply back to his mount. He dipped into his purse. The coins he proffered needed no

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interpretation, nor did the silent doffing of the man's cap as he accepted them. But for all the good will in the world, Simon could not frame in the man's own tongue the words of gratitude he sought, and he was a man of few gestures. At last the young woman stepped forward, pointing at the pig and making from her own breasts to the bottom of her belly a sign they all understood—the pig was in fact a sow and was enceinte. She waved her hands vigorously from side to side, pointing back to the sow. This, she gave Simon clearly to understand, was not the moment to upset a female.

Villeneuve was, alas, too highly born for Simon to condemn him to a public beating for disobeying orders. But he had to endure a veritable tongue-lashing, and lost his privileges for many days. Simon would have sent him home in disgrace immediately had he not needed him so much: to discuss the plans for the improvement of the stockade, to find the best timber, locate the purest springs. And to recruit—if that was not too mealy-mouthed a term—the local workmen. Simon was entitled to enslave the entire populace and work it to death if so he wished. Many of his brother barons certainly did. But he was a soldier, not a slave master, and though he didn't think anyone had ever accused him of lax discipline, he preferred to temper force with fairness. And, like every good soldier, he prided himself on knowing not just every man in his command but also what that man's function was and where he might be found at any time.

Most of the men were serfs, unskilled men with little to commend them except their numbers and their—enforced—willingness. But others—the scaffolders, the carpenters—had an expertise that Simon found himself respecting. One of the latter was the young man who'd saved Villeneuve from the pig. They would greet each other with a silent nod. Simon had no desire to encourage insubordination; no doubt the carpenter—Beom—didn't want to toady. At least, however, it was a greeting. Perhaps, Simon reflected, it wasn't just his new hilltop castle that was being built, looming over the countryside with threatening grandeur: Perhaps a bridge was being slowly built between the rulers and the ruled.

Except that even as he turned to inspect the next section of bailey, he could see Villeneuve still doing his best to chop the imaginary bridge off at the foundations, harrying, striking, cutting with his glove. Would he never learn?

"Enough!" Simon shouted. "If you spent more time on your own function, less on interfering with others', I should be better satisfied. I said, enough! Present yourself to me tomorrow morning, after prayer."

The animals were hungry. Well, the people were hungry, and devoured scraps which would normally have been the swines' almost by right. So Aedburgha had let her charges wander deeper than

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usual into the forest, rooting through beech mast and snuffling for acorns. Aedburgha could still hear them, would be able to gather them together when dusk came. She sat against the south face of an oak tree, huddling in what little sun penetrated the gloom, and wished that there was more bread. Not that she was unhappy. She was handfasted to Beom, a good man seemingly well-respected up at the castle. And now she was with child—her breasts and latterly her belly assured her this was so—they would soon be married. As for living—well, he would build them their own place as soon as he had the chance. And the few groats the Normans doled out would help.

Maybe if Beom spoke well of her, she might find work up there herself. But when she asked if he'd done so, he always found some excuse, and the village rumours suggested he was right. Better be poor with your pigs for company than poor with unruly hands to fend off. But there were other more welcome hands. She smiled to herself: It was about this time that Beom would be making his way back through the forest. He told his masters he was discussing with the forester which trees to fell next, which would season well. And because he was an honest man, she was sure he did. At the end of the day he would help her gather the swine together and herd them back to shelter. But between his forestry and his herding, there was time for the sort of moment that made her lean back against the tree, a smile softening her face.

She was waiting for him. Look at her: not so much waiting as positively inviting. Villeneuve's eyes relished her face as he imagined pushing apart those soft lips. But the lips weren't his target. Oh no. Much lower down. Which would he do? Take her by surprise? Or enjoy the thrill of the chase, see her eyes flare, see her run from him, falling as he caught her and watch her face contort as he took her? Some men said women liked force. Like it or not, that was what she was going to get. He thought with his fist or his pizzle, did he? Well, as he slipped from his horse, he knew just what he was thinking with today.

No one up at the castle took much notice when Villeneuve was late for the evening meal. It wasn't the first time, probably wouldn't be the last. Not unless Simon chose to make a real example of him. Yes, this time he must. The man's swaggering insolence set a bad example to men all too ready to follow it. As for his fornication, the Lady Rosamunde, who would be joining Simon as soon as the living quarters were ready for feminine company, would demand an end to that. She'd been ready to embrace a contemplative life when her father had preferred a more earthly union for her, and she brought to Simon's circle an air of delicacy and refinement he could see was sadly lacking now. Tomorrow morning, then, Vil-

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leneuve would be flogged and sent on his way. If Simon himself still found it impossible to get his tongue around the agglomeration of alien diphthongs these Saxons insisted on calling a language, many of his men had devised a rough lingua franca which enabled them to communicate. Another interpreter they would surely need, but they could make shift—wasn't that the term he'd heard Beom using?—until the replacement arrived. Tomorrow: So be it.

How dare the wretched man disobey a direct order? There was no sign of him at the time Simon had appointed. When asked, his colleagues shuffled awkwardly. Perhaps he was dealing with a thick, mead-filled head? For whatever reason, he hadn't appeared in the chapel, nor had he broken his fast with the others, either in the hall or in the guardroom, where he was wont to boast of the previous night's amorous adventures. It wasn't the first time his servant had to admit that his master had not returned at all—perhaps he had found a congenial bed to wait in till curfew was lifted. Rutting when he should have been begging his lord for mercy? Simon slammed his fist into his palm with anger. When noon had come and gone, however, he despatched search parties. A Norman—even one intent on dalliance—did not go far without armour, but all Villeneuve had taken, his servant admitted, were his helm and his hauberk.

"Has his horse returned yet?" Simon demanded. Perhaps he was being unjust. The man might simply have taken a toss and be lying unconscious.

The answer was negative. But that was inconclusive, too: a foot in a rabbit hole could injure a horse as well as a man. More ominously, the ability of the Saxons to spirit away a valuable horse was legendary.

The search parties returned with nothing to report.

"No tracks? No signs of a scuffle?" he demanded. "Did the dogs pick up no scent?"

"Only the smell of pigs, my lord. That young woman's let the damned animals range the whole forest."

"Come, the man couldn't have vanished into thin air! Have you questioned the villagers?"

"Villeneuve was the only man who could talk to them," came the predictable reply.

Simon knew what Villeneuve's counsel would have been. It was standard, if illegal, policy. They kill one of ours, we kill as many of theirs as we can lay hands on. But what was the point of such measures if those punished didn't know what they were being punished for? A baser thought struck him. Mass executions would delay the building of his private quarters, and the Lady Rosamunde was joining him on the understanding that the nearest he could achieve to civilisation was awaiting her. Damn Vil-

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leneuve: an irritation in life, and now an irritation in what was almost certainly death.

There must be some in the team of workmen who spoke French well enough to assist him in the interrogations he knew he must carry out. He summoned Luc, his clerk of works, a man, like himself, of middle years.

"It's hard to tell, my lord. There's plenty that understand without wanting to let on, if you see what I mean. Sullen, some of them. But there's one that's grown into a sort of foreman—thickset man, early twenties. Listens more than he talks, it's true. But there's a look about his eyes, if you know what I mean—like a good alert dog."

"And he speaks French?"

Luc shook his head. "I don't say that. I do say he'll understand enough to find someone who does or just to get the whisper going round that you're going to torch the village if they don't come up with news of Villeneuve. That'll bring some action."

"I don't like making threats I can't fulfill," Simon said, almost to himself.

The clerk looked at him. "Ah, you're the sort that'd rather build up than pull down! And . . ."

"Go on, man."

To his astonishment, Luc blushed. "I've—well, I've got my own reasons why I don't want the village destroyed."

"The usual?" he asked tolerantly.

"She's what they call a comely wench, my lord."

"So *you* can speak their tongue?"

"Who said anything about speaking, my lord? But we've got one on the way, and to my mind—well, isn't conquest by the cock kinder than conquest by the sword?"

"So it's a political bedding, is it?" Simon laughed. "Go and fetch your foreman, Luc, and we'll see if we older ones can achieve what the younger ones can't."

Within a few minutes a familiar figure bent a polite but not obsequious head. Beom. So that was the foreman. Simon wasn't surprised. Beom listened with an air of calm dignity, but, as Luc had predicted, gave little away. Little—apart, perhaps, from a tiny frisson of—of fear?

Surely not. Within the tiniest of moments, his face was phlegmatic again. Nodding, he listened to Simon, raising a hand to his ear when he wanted a phrase repeated.

"You know this knight of mine?" Simon asked at last.

Beom's features assumed a sneer, and he mimed the big-balls swagger of a man set on sexual conquest. Oh yes: He knew him, all right.

"And does he have enemies?"

Beom's disbelieving shrug would have put a Norman's to shame

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it was so expansive. Such a man undoubtedly had enemies. Beom even managed an ironic smile, pointing to the scar left by Villeneuve's whip.

"Did you kill him?"

Eyes meeting his lord's, Beom shook his head.

"Do you know the man who did?"

The same response.

"Tomorrow morning I shall question every man in the village, and you will tell me their answers. If the murderer confesses, I shall spare the rest of the village."

Beom nodded. Simon waved him away. But he stood his ground, and for the first time spoke. He had to repeat what he said several times before Simon could understand him. At last it seemed to make sense: "Have you found this man's body yet?"

Simon decided to treat the man honestly. He shook his head.

Was it relief that flashed across Beom's face? Ah, a man like him would know the law, wouldn't he? Wherever a Norman body was found, the nearest village would find itself paying a punitive fine.

Simon had no compunction in ousting what had been the thegn from his hut and appropriating his chair. The only chair. My God, no wonder these people shuffled round older than their years if they squatted all the time! He asked each villager, freeman or serf, the same questions, making them lay their hands on his Bible as they replied. And Simon, even without this, would have believed them. There was an air of bafflement about them, not to mention the terror of losing more of what little they had.

At the end of a tedious morning, Simon waved them all away. "Beom, get them all back to work. My wife will be coming next week: Everything must be ready for her."

It was the sort of day that you wished you could cram into a flask and keep forever. The sun was warm on his back, the air full of birdcall. And the news that the Lady Rosamunde had but this morning whispered, that she was soon to offer him another pledge of her love for him, still sang in his ears. Simon rode gently down to the village. Another hut was being built: Beom had told him it was his and his new wife's. Aedburgha was nowhere to be seen. She must be near her time now. The squeals of her charges told him where he might find her, and he never had any objection to being smiled on by—what was the term?—a comely wench. He reeled in shock when he saw what she and another woman were doing to the young pigs they'd penned immovably in a tight wattle tunnel. It was all very swift, of course, but the very thought brought tears to his eyes.

If Beom was now speaking a little of his tongue, Aedburgha still

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relied on sign language. She pointed to the sows, the sleekest and best-looking he'd seen since he'd come over from Beaune. Then there came piglets. She mimed a fierce boar, then a snip. She smiled, waving her hands to show all fierceness was over, and that the desexed animals would grow big and fat and healthy. Next came a fearsome pregnant sow. She gestured a slit: The female ones, untroubled by pregnancy, would do the same. Suddenly she reached for one and held it up, still bleeding after surgery. Heavens, she was giving him a pig.

He took it graciously, but handed it swiftly to the soldier escorting him: He hoped and trusted that the villagers were coming to appreciate his humanity and realise they could get a man six times worse in his place, but he didn't take risks. This, however, must be the ultimate peace offering—a woman who had been insulted by one of his henchmen giving something she could ill afford. She waved away the coin he offered. A good woman. The sort who might attend the lady Rosamunde when her time came.

"Pig?" he said carefully, pointing at the wriggling animal. No, it would be another word for the female. "Sow?"

She shook her head. "Gilt," she said. She pointed to an animal which had not yet been on the receiving end of her ministrations. "Sow." Then she pointed to the one she'd given him. "Gilt."

Lords might do as they liked, and if Simon chose to visit a small wattle enclosure to check his animal's daily progress, there was no one with the temerity to laugh. In fact, it was while he was scratching her ears and speculating on the quality of the meat she would produce that Luc came up to him. One look at his face told Simon he'd rather not hear his news.

Luc produced from his tunic a ring. "Found it when I was casting a line yesterday evening. Villeneuve's, isn't it, my lord?" He polished it before he handed it over. "See—that's his crest."

Simon took it. Yes, it looked like it, didn't it? "The river, you say?" He held Luc's gaze. "The man must have dropped it and tried to save it. The water's very swift, and of course his helm and hauberk would weigh him down. Even Villeneuve wasn't so stupid as to go round without them. Drowned, swept away. Poor bastard. Still, it's good to have the mystery solved. I'll get the priest to write to his family. Thank you, Luc."

Alone once more, Simon stared at the sow, currently tucking into scraps from last night's venison and some mouldy bread. Her little eyes were contented, almost benign. Not like those of the raging sow that had almost done for Villeneuve. The pregnant ones were dangerous under provocation, Aedburgha had shown him. He shivered. Provocation? What if Villeneuve had renewed his assault on Aedburgha? What if the sow—? Or, God help him, what if preg-

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nant women were equally dangerous? God knew she'd been provoked . . . but sufficiently provoked to kill? There was no doubt how she'd have disposed of the body—her pigs would have fallen readily upon anything they thought edible.

He buried his face in his hands. He represented law and order and justice here. If there was a crime, it must be punished. But Beom had told him only two days before that he was now the proud father of a hopeful son, and Simon had offered to be a sponsor at the child's christening. In his mind's eye he could see the little family, the newborn suckling at its mother's breast—a breast that he'd hoped would nourish his and Rosamunde's own child when the time came. Could such a woman really have killed a man and fed his flesh to those remarkably healthy sows? If he ordered Beom's hut to be pulled down, would they find the contents of Villeneuve's purse buried under the foundations? He looked at the ring.

The armour! That would provide the answer.

But a woman who knew the forest as she did would have had no difficulty hiding a helm, even bulky chain mail—up one tree, inside another.

Simon looked across at the mass of green, pulsing in the gentle wind. The sky was blue again, with fluffy clouds. The pastures were dotted with sheep and cattle cropping their way to a prosperous future. Wheat and corn were greening the fields.

No, he told himself, there'd be no reopening of the inquiry. If wrong had been left unavenged in this life, the Almighty would deal with it in the next. And if he felt a tremor of remorse as he called for the priest to convey his condolences to the Villeneuve family, he knew he'd just have to endure it. He'd live with the guilt.

And with the gilt. He leant over and scratched her ear again. ●

Happy Birthday, Holmes!

EQMM has a long history of association with the Baker Street Irregulars. Our founding editor, Frederic Dannay, was a faithful member of this, the oldest, Sherlockian organization, and for many years *EQMM*'s February issue, which goes on sale around the time of the BSI's annual dinner on January 6th, has included some Sherlockian content.

The first BSI dinner, the brainchild, in part, of author/editor Christopher Morley, was held in June, 1934. Later, it was decided there should be an annual gathering on Twelfth Night, the birth date assigned to Sherlock Holmes. For years, women were excluded from this black-tie banquet—all but "The Woman," that is, a single honorary woman guest who represented the Holmes-story character Irene Adler. Several dinners past, that changed, and last January your editor was one of more than two dozen women who joined the otherwise tuxedoed throng at the Union League Club for a splendid meal in honor of the world's most famous detective.

EQMM's offerings to Holmes this time round include reviews of Sherlockian books in The Jury Box and a new entry in Arthur Porges's pastiche series starring Stately Homes. But of course, all mystery fiction (and thus all of our stories) pay at least tangential homage to the great sleuth.

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A Dangerous Way to Die

by John H. Dirckx

Ed Stokes stamped cold feet on the colder sidewalk. Shading his eyes with his hand against the brittle light of a January morning, he peered once more into the dark interior of Leroy's Barbershop.

For the third time in as many minutes, his companion Bert Fantini consulted a pocket watch on the end of a piece of braided black shoestring, even though the clock in the barbershop window clearly showed that it was within a minute or two of nine-thirty. "In twenty years," he said, "I never knew Leroy to open up late. I hope he ain't sick."

It has become commonplace for writers to incorporate whatever expert knowledge they've acquired in their "day jobs" in their fiction—but not for John H. Dirckx. A practising physician and the author of many nonfiction books on medical topics, he rarely gives medical facts a prominent role in the stories he writes for us. His plots turn on things people encounter in everyday life, and his characters have the solidity and common sense one associates with Dirckx's native Midwest. ¶

"Probably got this flu that's going around," suggested Stokes. "Hey, it's cold out here. What say we duck in the vegetarian diner and grab a cup of coffee?"

Fantini made a face. "You ever been in there? I hear they make their coffee with dried tomato seeds."

"Well, here comes Rafferty. He eats in there every morning and it ain't killed him yet."

The gaunt, bearded man just emerging from the diner next to the barbershop walked with the proud bearing of an aristocrat and the abstracted air of a professor of Eastern religions. He was, in fact, a flower vendor, who for years had set up his pitch in this block of Hamilton Street, varying his exact location with the time of day and the time of year.

In one hand Rafferty carried a bucket of long-stemmed carnations and roses, each wrapped in white glazed paper, and in the other a battered metal folding chair on which he would sit at his

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chosen post until the bucket was empty. Weather permitting, he usually set up on the corner in front of the barbershop, where he could hawk his wares to motorists on both Hamilton and Adair while they were waiting for the traffic signals to change.

Today he seemed to favor one of his alternative spots, a recessed doorway between the barbershop and Maynard's Vegetarian Diner. The two men waiting outside the barbershop saw Rafferty step into this recess, which led to the basement door of the building, and apparently vanish. Instead of placing his chair in the arched entryway and sitting on it with his bucket of flowers between his feet, he seemed simply to have been swallowed up by that dark opening.

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn drove around the block for the third time before giving up his quest for a parking place near his goal and leaving his car far down a side street. His goal was a business building on the north side of Hamilton Street, running west from the corner of Hamilton and Adair, a two-story structure with three storefront businesses side by side on the lower level and two apartments above. A terra cotta tablet on the fascia read "Bolton Block 1888." Auburn guessed that the rough-textured rust-red bricks of the Bolton Block hadn't been subjected to any other cleansing than the gentle rain from heaven since the day they were laid.

At Leroy's Barbershop on the corner, the interior lights and the neon sign in the window were turned off, and a CLOSED sign hung slightly askew behind the glass door. Between the barbershop and the diner next door, a narrow arched entry led to the basement stairs, and framed in that entry were the broad shoulders and homely face of Patrolman Terry Krasnoy. Krasnoy's cruiser was parked at the curb, with the white van from the coroner's office in the space behind it.

Auburn paused to orient himself and take stock of the building. On the other side of the diner from the barbershop was the third business in the building, Harry's Lock and Key. Between the diner and Harry's, the entrance to the apartments upstairs balanced off, with rigorous symmetry, the basement entrance between the diner and the barbershop, where Krasnoy stood at attention. Further along the sidewalk, a few idlers braved the sharp wind and awaited developments at a deferential distance.

After ascertaining from Krasnoy that the investigator from the coroner's office was below, Auburn went through the recessed doorway. A long flight of rickety wooden stairs running parallel to the street led down into a vast, murky, musty basement. He instinctively avoided contact with the grimy walls of the stairwell, from which flakes of fallen whitewash crunched underfoot like dried leaves.

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The air in the basement was warm and stuffy. Somewhere water dripped insistently and pipes clanked, both sounds echoing hollowly through the cavernous space. A faint gleam of daylight straggled through a series of filthy glass-block windows set just above sidewalk level, but the principal source of illumination was a row of naked light bulbs strung like pears along the rafters. Under one of the bulbs that was dark, two men were conferring over a body that lay twisted and still on the gritty concrete floor.

Before reaching the foot of the stairs, Auburn had recognized one of the men as Nick Stamaty, a county investigator who worked out of the coroner's office. The other was a man in his forties wearing an electrician's tool holster that looked as if it contained everything but a lug wrench for a Ferrari.

As Auburn approached, Stamaty raised a warning hand ensheathed in a rubber glove. "Watch where you step, Cy," he said. "This red stuff on the floor isn't all rust."

Auburn used his flashlight as he finished crossing the basement. The body, that of a middle-aged man wearing a light windbreaker over street clothes, lay on its back in a shallow puddle of water near an aluminum stepladder. The unbuttoned shirt and the pants legs rolled up to the knees were presumably Stamaty's work.

Auburn spotted a wallet, with the driver's license pulled out, lying on Stamaty's camera case. He shone his flashlight on the driver's license to verify the name and compare the picture with the battered, staring face of the man on the floor. Before leaving headquarters he had ascertained that Leroy Callard, fifty-seven, operated the barbershop on the corner of Hamilton and Adair, lived in one of the apartments upstairs, and owned the entire building.

He stooped down to inspect the dead man. "So who did this to him?" he asked Stamaty. "And with what?"

"I didn't say anything about a homicide," grumbled Stamaty. "I reported a possible robbery. You guys ought to get your signals straight." Normally suave and good-humored, he seemed unusually edgy this morning.

"Hey, don't jump down my throat, Nick. I just figured . . . What got stolen?"

"Maybe nothing. There's money in his wallet. But he doesn't have any keys on him, and the guy that found him says this basement is always locked."

"Was that you?" asked Auburn, looking at the electrician.

"No, sir. I'm a service representative from the power company." A plastic photo ID clipped to the lapel of his uniform shirt gave his name as Melvin Cottrell.

"I called them in," explained Stamaty, "because it looked to me

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like an accidental electrocution. Metal ladder, puddle on the floor, burned-out light bulb overhead—"

"And a citizen down." Auburn pointed to the extensive wounds on the dead man's brow and cheek. "Do you think he did all this damage to himself just by falling off the ladder?"

"Could be. The ladder was tipped over on the floor when I got here. But I also think somebody moved the body sometime after death, maybe to get his keys, maybe for some other reason. There's lividity on his arms and chest where it shouldn't be if he died in that position."

"How long dead?"

"At least five or six hours."

Auburn looked at his watch. "Who did find him?"

"Guy named Rafferty, around nine-thirty. He sits out there on the corner every day selling flowers out of a bucket."

"I saw him."

Auburn examined his surroundings. Unlike some basements, this one hadn't become a depository for castoff furniture and miscellaneous rubbish. Two steel drums at the foot of the stairs served as trash receptacles, and in a far corner a wooden packing case, empty and forgotten, slept under several decades' accumulation of dust. Next to a grubby sink, in the angle created by a concrete pier, a closet without a door held plastic buckets, a broom, a dustpan, a snow shovel, rags, other cleaning supplies, and replacement bulbs for the lights.

Near the rear wall an ancient gas-fired steam boiler hissed menacingly and emitted waves of oppressive heat. A row of gauges mounted on the wall dribbled condensed steam into a sloping earthenware trough, from where it ran into a floor drain. In the muddy light, the wet film of rust on the trough glowed with a dull reddish-gold sheen. Here and there trickles of water escaping through cracks in the trough meandered across the floor to feed shallow puddles that probably wouldn't dry until summer, after the steam heat was shut down.

The electrician looked as if he had a hankering to be elsewhere.

"Does it seem to you like he died from an electric shock?" Auburn asked him.

"Either that or else he got a bad enough jolt to make him fall off the ladder and land on his head." Cottrell was personable, amiable, and earnest, just as a service representative ought to be. "What he was doing here is just about as dangerous a thing as you could possibly imagine."

"So what was he doing?"

"There's a broken light bulb under him," said Stamaty. "The one in the socket up there is burned out. We figure he was getting ready to replace the dead one and grabbed the wrong part of the

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socket while he was grounded."

"Not only was he standing on a metal ladder in a puddle of water," said Cottrell, "but the polarity on that fixture was reversed. One of the commonest code violations we see."

Auburn shone his flashlight on the dark bulb overhead. "How about quoting me a couple of paragraphs from *Reversed Polarity for Dummies?*" he asked.

"Okay, sure. Your power supply has two wires, you know? Black and white. The white one's grounded, so if you get between it and a water pipe, or an aluminum ladder sitting in a puddle on the cellar floor, no current flows. You survive.

"Your black wire is hot. If you become part of a circuit involving the black wire, you maybe dance your last tango. That clear so far? White is cool and black is hot." He suddenly manifested an intense interest in the cobwebby rafters as he realized that the man he was talking to was African-American.

"Clear so far," Auburn assured him.

"The white wire is the one that's supposed to be connected to the part of an appliance that you're more liable to touch—like, for instance, the threaded part of a light socket. This socket was wired the other way around, with the hot wire going to the threaded part."

"Just this fixture, or all of them?"

"All of them. And they're all safe now."

"You changed the wires?"

"Yes, and I've already heard about that from Mr. Stamaty. But hey, guys, my job is to correct safety hazards and code violations when I find them."

Auburn let it pass. "Did it look to you like the wiring had been tampered with?"

"I couldn't say. The line connections are in that metal box nailed to the joist over there by the breaker box. There's no dust inside it, and the ceramic wire nuts don't show any marks. But then they never do."

"So it could have been wired wrong when the lights were first installed?"

"Could have been. Not by a professional electrician, though. It's just too big a mistake—like driving down the left side of the street, or putting your shoes on the wrong feet." The comparisons rolled so glibly off his tongue that Auburn felt sure he'd used them many times before. "But some people think if you own a couple of screwdrivers, that makes you an electrician."

They thanked Cottrell and sent him on his way.

"I was upstairs getting some coffee when he turned up," explained Stamaty. "Krasnoy let him in, and he stepped right over the body and did what he's paid to do. Used this ladder to do it,

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too. At least I got my pictures first."

"So where are we?" asked Auburn. "A fatal accident, or maybe a homicidal reversal of polarity. Then somebody, maybe the killer if there is one, slips in here during the night and takes the keys off the body."

"There sure aren't any keys in this basement. Did you come up with anything on the next of kin downtown?" Although finding and communicating with the next of kin was the responsibility of the coroner's office, help from the Department of Public Safety was always welcome.

"Not so far. Apparently he was a widower. They're still checking. Have you been upstairs to his apartment yet?"

"Krasnoy did all that before I got here. Says the apartment's locked."

Auburn thought in silence for a few moments as Stamaty packed up his gear.

"If he owned the building, he may have had keys on him to every door in the place. That means the stores and apartments may not be secure. I think we ought to get an evidence technician down here."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

Auburn made the necessary call to headquarters from his cell phone. Then he went up to the street level and approached the flower vendor, who was operating at the moment on the corner in front of the barbershop, and showed identification.

"I understand you're the one who found the body in the basement this morning."

The vendor nodded and said one word: "Leroy."

"You knew him?"

He nodded over his shoulder toward the barbershop. "Saw him in there every day cutting hair." He was a tall gray man with a patriarchal beard and a worn tweed coat several sizes too large for his bony frame. Auburn had seen him in the neighborhood many times over the years, but never at close quarters. The beard barely concealed a horrendous scar like a seam in a burlap sack that ran from the corner of his left eye down the side of his jaw.

Auburn took out a file card and a pen. "Could I get your name, sir?"

"Forrest Rafferty."

"How'd you happen to be in the basement this morning?"

"When it's windy like this, I set up in the doorway there where that cop is standing. Till the sun gets a little higher, anyway. If there is a sun. The door to the basement stairs was open and the lights were on down there, and I noticed Leroy hadn't opened up his shop yet, even though it was way after nine. So I got curious."

"Could you describe what you saw down there?"

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Rafferty paused to mull over his reply. Auburn couldn't be sure whether he was reflecting with the wisdom of maturity or struggling with senile dementia. "When I got to the bottom of the stairs," he said, "I saw Leroy on the floor. I didn't know it was him till I got closer. By that time I could tell he was dead."

"How was he lying, do you remember?"

"Pretty much on his back, maybe a little toward the left side, with his left arm up about like this."

"Where was the ladder?"

"Right next to him, tipped over on the floor." Rafferty shot quick glances along both streets, evidently fearful of missing a potential customer.

"Did you touch him, turn him over, look in his pockets?"

Rafferty's leathery face registered neither guilt nor indignation. "No, sir."

"Did you see anything there that seemed unusual, out of place?"

"No. But I've never been down there before."

Auburn found Patrolman Krasnoy stretching yellow plastic tape across the basement entrance. "Got a call, Sergeant. Scoutmaster says hang tape and hit the trail."

Auburn decided to touch base next with Harry, of Harry's Lock and Key. The locksmith was well known to the Department of Public Safety as a consultant in his special field, and also as a wag who liked to hint that he was secretly a professional burglar. No lock could withstand his assaults for long. Even without tools he could often coax open a locked chest or door in a few moments. With a picklock and a few scraps of wire, he was invincible.

Harry was working at a bench at the back of the shop behind a chest-high partition. When Auburn entered the shop, he put down his tools and came forward, wiping his hands on a rag. "I don't remember your name," said Harry, "but I know you're a detective."

"Cy Auburn. Did you hear about what happened in the basement this morning?"

"I heard Leroy was dead. Customer came in about an hour ago and said the cops were down in the basement. When I went out to take a look, Rafferty, the flower guy, told me all about it. Said it looked like an accident to him."

"Did you go down?"

"Not me. And I won't be at the funeral, either." Harry was dark and lithe, with eyes like blobs of tar and a curly black hairpiece that hugged his head like an inverted bird's nest.

"Have problems with Callard?"

Harry shrugged. "Son of a gun jacked up the rent on me the last five years in a row. What can I do for you?"

"I wonder if you know anything about the lighting system down there."

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"The lighting system?" Harry made an elaborate pretense of leaning over and looking around Auburn at the lettering on the front window. "I don't see anything there about Harry's Electric Service."

"It looks like Callard got a shock and fell off a ladder while he was changing a light bulb. An electrician from the power company says it probably happened because the fixture was wired backwards."

"Not guilty."

"Did you ever do any locksmithing for Callard?"

"Sure did. Lots of it. He owns four or five apartment buildings around town. Owned."

"Ever do any work for him here in this building?"

"Sure did. Especially here. He occupied one of the apartments upstairs himself."

"Did he have keys to parts of the building besides his apartment and the barbershop and the basement?"

"He couldn't have got in here without a stick of dynamite, but I'm sure he had duplicate keys to the rest of the units in the building. Something missing?"

"So far, just his keys. Is the basement normally locked?"

"Well, I guess. Otherwise we'd have a whole colony of street people hanging out down there."

"Who besides Callard would have a key to the basement?"

Harry shrugged again. "Probably just me. Let me rephrase that. I keep records of any locks I install, so if a customer loses a key I can cut a new one without picking the lock and taking it apart. An actual key to the basement I wouldn't have."

"Did he have a business partner?"

"No, sir. Lone-wolf type."

"What about a maintenance or custodial service that might have access to the basement?"

"I doubt it. Tenants are responsible for their own housekeeping."

"How did he get along with the other tenants?"

"You better ask them." Harry let his jaw sag so that his tongue showed behind his lower teeth, as if to say, "I could tell you a thing or two if I wanted to, but right now I'm giving my tongue a rest."

"How about some hints?"

"Leroy was an ornery old crank. Stingy. The first dollar he ever made is hanging on the wall of his shop in a picture frame. And nosy. He could have had a lot more business if he hadn't always tried to give his customers the third degree."

"I understand his wife is dead. Did he have any family?"

"Not that I ever heard about."

"Can you think of anybody who might have wanted him dead?"

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"Not bad enough to kill him. You figure somebody booby-trapped that light?"

"I'm wondering why he was down in the basement changing a light bulb in the middle of the night."

"Which light bulb was he changing?"

"The one right opposite the furnace."

"He needed that one to read the steam gauges. They show how much steam each unit in the building uses. He took a reading once a month and stuck a little blue slip in everybody's mailbox so we could add the heating bill in with the rent."

Auburn moved toward the door. "I may need to get you to open up Callard's apartment and the barbershop if we don't come up with any keys."

"I'll be around." Harry was already heading back to his workbench.

It was eleven-twenty when Auburn entered Maynard's Vegetarian Diner. The place was neither elegant nor even particularly clean, but already at least half the seats were occupied by early lunchers. A counter with eight fixed stools ran along the left side, and the rest of the floor space was taken up by tables with either two or four chairs. From the kitchen at the back emanated a rich mixture of culinary aromas, not entirely appealing to Auburn.

Two waitresses were in sight, one behind the counter and the other taking an order at one of the tables in the rear. "Seat yourself, dear," the nearer one called to Auburn. "It's all nonsmoking."

"Is the boss in?"

"Back in the kitchen."

Auburn stepped to the counter and showed her his identification unobtrusively. The waitress's eyes grew round and she looked toward the front and rear exits in quick succession as if she were meditating flight. "I'll get him."

When she went through the door to the kitchen, Auburn was at her heels. Apparently this room served as business office and pantry as well as kitchen. Stapled bundles of invoices and cash-register tapes overflowed from old food cartons on the floor. On all sides, shelves were crammed with jugs of oil and boxes of baking soda cheek by jowl with gallon cans of diced fruit and papaya juice.

The boss, a pudgy man in his middle forties wearing a soiled cloth apron and disposable vinyl gloves, was arranging food on plates with a practiced touch. Auburn still had his badge in his hand. "Sorry to interrupt you," he said, "but I'd like to talk to you about the incident down below this morning."

"You mean Leroy?" He glanced at Auburn's badge for a fraction of a second and then went on with his work, ladling soup into bowls, removing prefabricated side dishes from a refrigerator, sea-

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soning and turning things on a grill. "You aren't going to interrupt anything. Unless you shoot me. I got a cook and a dishwasher off with flu, and the noon rush hasn't even started yet. What do you need?"

"Just routine. Are you the proprietor here?"

"Yes, sir. Orrel Maynard."

Every surface in the kitchen appeared to be coated with a dull gray film of grease. Keeping his coat sleeves well away from the table where Maynard was working, Auburn took out a file card and a pen. "Leroy Callard was your landlord?"

"That's right. Rafferty said he fell off a ladder."

"When did you talk to Rafferty?"

Maynard flexed his left wrist sharply to pull the cuff of his glove away from his watch. "Probably about nine-thirty. Rafferty usually has coffee in here around nine o'clock, before he starts selling. About five minutes after he left this morning, he came back in, wanting to use the phone to call the cops. Said he found the basement door open and the lights on, and went down and found Leroy stone-cold dead on the floor next to a ladder."

"Did you go down to take a look?"

"No, sir, not with two of my people off sick." One of the waitresses came into the kitchen, arranged order slips on a carousel above the table, and whisked away some finished orders.

"What time did you come in this morning?"

"Six. We don't open till seven, but I have to be here earlier to start the coffee, get deliveries . . ."

. . . And stomp on a few cockroaches, thought Auburn. "Did you notice that the basement was open?"

"No. I probably haven't been out on the sidewalk in front for two or three weeks. I always come in the back way, and that's where the delivery trucks park, too."

"Do you have a key to the basement?"

"No."

"How did you and Callard get along?"

"We didn't. He wouldn't give me more than a one-year lease, and every year, the rent went up. And he threatened not to renew if I didn't cut back on some of the spices and seasonings I cook with. Said the smell went through this wall and ran customers out of his shop."

"Did the other tenants have any trouble with him?"

"I imagine so. Hey, did somebody kill him?"

"We're considering the possibility. No keys were found on the body."

Business was picking up, and the tempo at which Maynard and the waitresses were working increased accordingly. Auburn nodded toward the grill. "Is that really some kind of imitation hamburger?"

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"That's one hundred percent grade-A beef," Maynard assured him, pressing the patty firmly against the grill with a heavy spatula and making it sizzle. "About twenty years back, my dad started this vegetarian gimmick because the fast-food places were killing us. You know what? I sell more burgers than the Longhorn Roundup over on Wilcox. But if your idea of haute cuisine is spinach soup, deep-fried portobello mushrooms, and a soy bar, this is the place to be."

As Auburn was leaving the diner, a customer was just coming in. In spite of the weather, the newcomer was wearing only an unbuttoned sleeveless sweater over a T-shirt that proclaimed, in straggling red letters, "Don't Point Me—I'm Loaded." And although he seemed sober enough at the moment, he certainly had the complexion of a man who has often yielded to a thirst for something stronger than papaya juice. As they passed, he gave Auburn a flinty, menacing stare that meant roughly, "Blow my cover and they'll fish your body out of Scatcherd Reservoir next week."

The wind had died down and the temperature had risen a few degrees.

Rafferty, his bucket still half full, was now on his feet at the corner, brandishing samples of his wares and barking unintelligibly at motorists bogged down in the noon-hour traffic. An evidence van from headquarters was double-parked next to Stamaty's van.

The typical municipal police department employs crime photographers, evidence technicians, and fingerprint experts. And in the typical crime-scene investigation, the fingerprint expert finds the evidence tech's prints all over the murder weapon, the evidence tech discovers strands of fabric from the photographer's living-room carpet under the body, and the photographer keeps getting the fingerprint expert's elbow in his pictures.

Sergeant David Kestrel, M.S., director of the forensic lab, performed all these functions sequentially, if not simultaneously, with the rigid precision of a robot. Humorless and aloof, he worked alone by preference, fully absorbed in his work and more or less oblivious of others at the scene. That was all very well when the crime was burglary or vandalism, but in homicide cases he usually ran into Stamaty, and then the sparks were apt to fly.

When Auburn slipped under the plastic tape at the basement entrance and went back downstairs, one glance at Stamaty's face told him the trouble had already started. Kestrel had set up a powerful floodlight near the foot of the stairs and was now working around the periphery of the basement with camera in hand, approaching the body by a series of oblique marches. Meanwhile he was haranguing Stamaty about his shortcomings as an investigator, in the aggrieved tone that was his normal mode of communication.

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"You should have kept him here long enough so I could roll a set of his prints . . ."

"He was wearing gloves."

". . . and take impressions of the soles of his shoes, and some dust samples." Kestrel looked up, noticed Auburn standing next to Stamaty, and continued his tirade without so much as a nod of salutation. "By the way, you better check your own shoes. It looks to me like somebody walked through some of this blood."

Auburn went back to the sidewalk. The recessed door to the stairway leading up to the apartments was locked. One of the mailboxes inside the entry bore the name of Leroy Callard, the other that of C. M. Deake.

Rafferty had abandoned his folding chair outside the barbershop, probably while having lunch in the diner. Auburn was hungry himself, but he decided to steer clear of the diner so as to avoid further encounters with the unsavory character in the T-shirt. Besides, he'd seen the kitchen. He had lunch at Maynard's competitor's, the Longhorn Roundup, and phoned in a request to Records for background checks on the people he'd interviewed that morning, as well as C. M. Deake.

When he got back to Hamilton Street, Stamaty's van was gone and Kestrel's was parked in its place. From that he deduced that the mortuary crew had already removed the body and that Kestrel was still around somewhere putting pinches of dust in little plastic envelopes and gobs of muck in test tubes.

He found Harry the locksmith just polishing off the last mouthful of something brought from home in a plastic container, featuring lots of cheese and raw onion. Harry agreed to open Callard's apartment so that Auburn could take a look around. He consulted some records, put a few tools in a kit, and locked the front door of the shop.

Harry had a master key to the street door that gave access to the apartments. The stairway that led up to them, like the basement stairway directly below it, lay parallel to the street. It ended at a right angle in a hallway that ran back through the middle of the upper floor to a rear stairway and fire exit. The air in the hallway was chilly and spiced by the smell of cooking from the diner. Auburn rang and knocked at Callard's apartment before trying the door and finding it locked, as Krasnoy had reported.

Harry knelt down and examined Callard's door with a flashlight. "Don't watch too close, Officer," he said, in his customary tone of banter. "Every trade has its secrets."

The door of the apartment across the hall from Callard's bore a computer-generated logo, vaguely reminiscent of the kind of fantasy-science fiction symbolism favored by early adolescents, and the name Chaz Deake. There was no answer to Auburn's knock.

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He walked along the hall to the back of the building and glanced out into the alley, where Kestrel was poking around in a steel trash receptacle. Hearing Callard's apartment door open, he turned back from the window. Harry was tucking a strip of plastic away in his shirt pocket. He hadn't even opened his tool kit.

"What did you do, 'loid it?" asked Auburn.

"Sure did. Deadlatch wasn't on. Leroy probably didn't use the key when he went down to change that bulb, since the outside doors to the front and back stairs are always locked."

"Either that or somebody else got here before we did."

"Gotta get back. Send the bill the usual place?"

"Don't send it yet. I might need you to get me in the barbershop."

A light was on in the entry hall of Callard's apartment. The place was comfortably, even expensively, furnished, but like Auburn's own place it lacked the touches of color and organized confusion that betray a feminine influence. Callard appeared to have led a prosaic existence, enlivened only by beer, cigarettes, and old war movies on videocassette.

He had used one bedroom as a business office. To the trained observer it was evident that the desk and filing cabinets had been thoroughly ransacked, presumably since Callard's death. Yet several hundred dollars in cash lying in an unlocked drawer hadn't been taken. Callard's business records, including documents and accounts pertaining to his real-estate interests, were in excellent order. There was no indication that any electrical work or other repairs had recently been done anywhere in the building.

Auburn found spare keys to the barbershop and the other businesses in the building, keys to the basement, keys to other rental properties in the neighborhood. He also found the name of Callard's lawyer and used the apartment phone to call him, but had to leave a message.

He was getting ready to go downstairs for a search of the barbershop when he heard someone coming up the back stairs. It didn't sound like Kestrel's resolute, goose-stepping tread, and anyway Kestrel couldn't have got in the back door. Unless he'd found the elusive keys in the trash out back. Auburn waited warily in the doorway to see who appeared.

A pudgy man in his late thirties came slouching along the hall with a suitcase in one hand and a backpack hunched up on the opposite shoulder to balance the weight. As he drew abreast of the open door of Callard's apartment, he glanced in curiously and gave a start when he saw Auburn lurking in the shadows.

"Mr. Deake?" asked Auburn, showing identification.

"Yes, sir. Something wrong?"

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Auburn decided it was time to vary his approach. "I wonder if you have a key to the basement, sir?"

"Not me. Doesn't Leroy have one?" He peered past Auburn into the empty apartment. He had short sandy hair, a tired but happy face, and widely spaced front teeth, which he seemed to enjoy exposing in a perpetual oafish grin.

"Mr. Callard had an accident."

"Oh? What happened?"

"We're not sure yet. He was found dead down in the basement this morning."

If this message made any emotional impact on Deake, it didn't show in his facial expression. "Hey, care if I open up here and dump this junk?" He unlocked and opened the door of his apartment without waiting for permission. "Like the guy said, when one foot hurts you need a doctor, but when both feet hurt you need a chair." On the threshold he stooped awkwardly and picked up a slip of blue paper that had been shoved under the door.

Auburn followed him in. The apartment was cold. Deake dropped his luggage in the middle of the living room floor and went to turn up the heat.

"Been on vacation?" asked Auburn.

"Spent New Year's with my sister and her family in Palm Beach." His collapse into an overstuffed chair resembled the crash of a dirigible. "Wore myself out helping my brother-in-law put a new engine in their boat. What did Leroy do, fall down the stairs and break his neck?"

"Not exactly. It looks like he fell off a ladder while he was changing a light bulb. May have gotten a shock."

"Why'd you ask me if I had a key to the basement?"

"Just routine. Callard didn't have any keys on him when his body was found."

"Okay, but the basement must be unlocked if that's where somebody found him." Auburn sensed that Deake was one of those people who look like the village idiot but are always about three jumps ahead of you. He took out a file card.

"May I ask where you're employed, sir?"

"Right here. Freelance journalist, mostly local history and local politics. Do a lot of editing and proofreading, too."

"Been here long?"

"Six years. Place is a dump, no air-conditioning, the diner downstairs puts garlic and curry in everything they cook, the neighborhood's a jungle after dark, but . . ." He pulled himself upright in his chair. "Hey, care if I go down to the mailbox and see if I've got a check? I might need to run to the bank before it closes."

While Deake was absent, Auburn examined the blue slip he'd put down on a stand in the entry hall and then quickly made the

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rounds of the apartment. He was back in the living room when Deake returned with a fistful of mail.

"I'm still not sure what you're looking for," he said as he sorted through it.

"Does anybody but you have a key to your place?"

"Just Leroy."

"I wish you'd check around here and see if everything seems okay. As I mentioned, Callard's keys are missing. It's possible somebody may have access to your apartment."

Deake looked up sharply. "Somebody? You mean you think they killed him?"

"Homicide is a possibility. That's why I'm here. Do you know of anybody who might have wanted him dead?"

"That's putting it a little strongly. He was a mean, obstinate cuss, but not enough to make anybody want to kill him." He excused himself and swiftly repeated the tour of kitchen, dinette, bedroom, bath, and study that Auburn had just made. "I don't think anybody's been in here," he reported.

Auburn suggested that he talk to Harry about having his lock changed, or at least—since he didn't go out to work every day—that he keep his chain bolt on.

After locking Callard's apartment with the key so as to engage the deadlatch, he went down the back stairs and out by the alley door. Kestrel had evidently completed his operations here. Auburn opened the rear entrance of the barbershop and went in.

Either the NO SMOKING signs were of recent origin or they weren't enforced. The stench of stale cigarette smoke was a palpable presence, nearly extinguishing the pungent tang of hair tonic—the kind only barbers use. There were three barber chairs, but apparently only the one nearest the front door had been in regular use, the others having been stripped of essential parts to keep the first one in working order.

Besides racks of combs and Butch Wax for sale, the walls were plastered with signs, jokes, cartoons, and articles clipped from magazines and newspapers. There was also a moth-eaten moose head and, just as Harry had said, a dollar bill in a tackily ornate picture frame.

The clock in the window said 2:20. Kestrel's van was still parked out in front. Rafferty was still at his post, his yapping occasionally audible over the hum of the traffic. At the risk of attracting unwelcome attention, Auburn put on the fluorescent lights and made a thorough search. At the back of the shop, in a boxlike, windowless office, he found business records pertaining to the barbershop. In contrast to the records upstairs, these gave no indication of having been disturbed.

Before returning to the basement to confer with Kestrel, he

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crossed the street to interview the proprietor of the gas station on the opposite corner.

"They have a robbery over there?"

"We're not sure. The owner of the building was found dead down in the basement. What time did you come in this morning?"

"Opened up at six, like always."

"Nobody here during the night?"

"I can't get cashiers to work after dark. Once the other businesses around here close down for the night, this area turns into a wasteland. People don't come around here after dark to spend money—they come to grab some."

"Did you notice anything unusual going on across the way early this morning?"

"Not till the cop car came. Which didn't seem all that unusual."

Auburn found Kestrel standing at attention in the middle of the basement, staring at the floor with the rapt attention of a mystic.

"Find anything back there in the trash?" asked Auburn.

"Trash," replied Kestrel, without looking up. Evidently he was in his usual feisty mood. Besides, being a typical workaholic, he'd probably skipped lunch.

"Any fresh prints down here?"

"Zip. Do you see what I see?"

It took Auburn about twenty seconds to put it together. "The puddle under the ladder is shrinking and the other ones aren't."

"Exactly."

Back at headquarters, Auburn found a message from Callard's lawyer and promptly returned it. The lawyer was trying to reach the next of kin, distant relatives in a distant city, who were also the heirs. He had routinely handled Callard's contracts with his tenants. When asked if he knew of any troubles with any of the tenants, he mentioned only the fact that, on Callard's instructions, he had recently sent Orrel Maynard an official notice that his lease would not be renewed when it expired at the end of May. The lawyer had been given no reason for the nonrenewal. He also volunteered the information that Shalimar Foods, owner of a local chain of supermarkets, had been badgering Callard to sell the building on Hamilton for the past two years without success.

Auburn reported to his superior, Lieutenant Savage, in the squad room that afternoon because Savage's office was being repainted. They sat at a table in the corner, hoping the brisk, strident chatter of the dispatchers in the next room would drown out their own conversation.

"How high is this light fixture?" Savage wanted to know.

"It's screwed to the underside of the joist. The ladder's eight feet, and I'd say the joists are about a yard above the top of the ladder."

"Stamaty didn't see any burns on either hand?"

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Auburn worded his answer very carefully, since he hadn't discussed burns with Stamaty. "He probably didn't hold on to the fixture long enough to get burned—just long enough to get a jolt and lose his balance. What would be the quickest way to get in touch with Stilcho?"

Savage glared reproachfully at him and then took a quick look around the room to see if anyone had heard. "That's a name you don't mention around here, Cy."

During his time at the police academy, Auburn had twice been turned down for undercover work because he looked, talked, and acted too much like a member of the Establishment. Perhaps on that account, he had always resented the elitist attitude and independent status of undercover agents, particularly wildcat operatives like Gary Stilcho.

"I saw him in the diner next to Callard's barbershop, giving an impersonation of a street person. I was wondering if he was working on a case in the neighborhood, or just sliding back into the gutter."

"He's following leads regarding the Hilliard kid." Chase Hilliard, the fifteen-year-old son of a local manufacturing tycoon, had died two months earlier after smoking crack cocaine. "They're pretty sure he got the stuff somewhere in that neighborhood. If you even think you're within a mile of an illicit drug operation, Cy, you back off and report to me immediately, day or night. That's an order."

"I don't even know if I'm within a mile of a homicide. I'm pretty sure somebody snatched Callard's keys off his body and searched his apartment. According to the electrician, the wires to the light fixture were reversed, and according to Kestrel, the puddle the ladder was standing in was created deliberately. But if it was a death-trap, how do we know the killer meant it for Callard?"

"Motives?"

"Maynard had the best motive that I know of. But how could he be sure that killing Callard would save his lease? And he shouldn't have had a key to the basement. The tenant upstairs didn't care much for Callard, but apparently he had no particular motive for killing him, and he shouldn't have had a key, either. The locksmith could have gotten down there to reverse the polarity on the lamp, but then he wouldn't have needed to steal the keys."

"You're going around in circles, Cy. It sounds like one of these moronic logic puzzles—the Irishman is left-handed, the lady with the dog lives in the blue house . . ."

Auburn closed his eyes and visualized the dingy basement where Callard had died, with its row of light bulbs strung like pears below the rafters.

"I'll tell you what it reminds me of," he said. "When I was a kid, my uncle George used to drive me bonkers with riddles. I busted my brains on one about pears:

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'Twelve pears hung on a tree;
Twelve men came in groups of three;
Each plucked a single pear,
But left eleven hanging there.'

The solution is that one of the men was named 'Each.' But you expect some trick involving the groups of three, or maybe 'pear,' meaning fruit, and 'pair,' meaning two. If it started out 'Twelve apples hung on a tree,' it'd be too easy."

Savage nodded. "Diversionary tactics. Misdirection, magicians call it. Distracts you from the real puzzle. You can't find the answer if you don't know the question." After which sage remarks, he stood up to signify that the interview was at an end.

In his office, Auburn found a terse e-mail message from Stamaty. The autopsy on Callard was under way. The forensic pathologist had confirmed Stamaty's observation that the position of the body had been altered sometime after death. His initial impression was that death was due to a severe head wound. There was no evidence for or against electrical shock.

Preliminary background checks on Maynard, Deake, Rafferty, and Aristoteles "Harry" Angeloudaki had uncovered no criminal convictions, suspicious associations, or even bad credit ratings. Kestrel was still sorting his specimens upstairs in the lab.

Auburn spread file cards and reports out on his desk, determined to make sense of the irreconcilable issues of the missing keys and the harebrained though evidently successful homicide scheme. Something he'd seen or heard was gnawing away in a remote part of his brain, trying to break into his consciousness. And something else inside him was trying to prevent that epiphany, because he seemed to sense that, if it occurred, he would lose control of the case.

It was four forty-five by the clock on the courthouse across the street.

By a little after six that evening, Harry's Lock and Key was under lock and key. Maynard's Vegetarian Diner closed for the night around nine, and promptly at ten the lights at the gas station across the street went off.

At a quarter to eleven, a human figure, muffled to the eyes in a worn overcoat and a navy-blue watch cap, shuffled drunkenly along the alley behind the Bolton Block. The night was dark and cold. Only occasionally did a stray moonbeam touch with silver the trail of cloud the walker's breath left behind him. Outside the back door of Leroy's Barbershop he paused to make a careful survey of his surroundings before unlocking the door and slipping inside.

By the dull gleam from the streetlight out on the corner, he

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made his way to the office, entered it, and shut the door. He turned on a flashlight briefly to orient himself and chose a case of paper towels in the corner as a place to sit and wait. The stool at the desk was probably more comfortable, but it had no back, and here he could lean against the wall. He put away his flashlight and opened the office door again, leaving it slightly ajar.

The minutes crawled by with maddening slowness, as they always do for one who waits in the dark. Up until midnight, a distant church bell sounded the quarters. After that, signs of life reached the watcher only at irregular intervals—a car driving by with a boom box cranked up to maximum nuisance level, a biker wringing his throttle at the corner while he waited for the light to change, a group of exhilarated youths scouring down the street like a Comanche war party.

From time to time, sounds reaching him from other parts of the building made him wonder if he'd chosen the right place. It was after three A.M. and his earlier mood of restless anticipation was turning into black despair when the rattling of a key in the alley door told him that he'd played the right hunch after all. He stood up quickly and, using the noise made by the newcomer to cover the sound of his own movements, he slipped into the tight corner behind the office door, where he stood less chance of being blinded by a flashlight beam or of becoming the target of a weapon.

The visitor bustled furtively into the office, shut the door behind him, and found the light switch. "Stand still and raise your hands above your head," said the man in the corner.

At the first syllable, Gary Stilcho leapt half a foot into the air and emitted a cry of surprise that might have been heard out on the street. Ignoring instructions, he twisted around in the crowded space to see who was behind him. Despite Auburn's scruffy, disheveled appearance, Stilcho immediately recognized him, and made an elaborate show of not seeing the snub-nosed service revolver in his hand.

"What do you think you're doing, Auburn?" he growled.

"Arresting you for breaking and entering in the night season."

"Will you back off? I used a key."

"Don't they teach you any law at the Academy these days? Using a key is within the statutory meaning of 'breaking' if you haven't got any business 'entering' in the first place."

"I've got as much business entering as you do."

"You took that key off Callard's body last night, didn't you? Without bothering to report his death? Or did you kill him yourself?"

"Don't be a jerk. I'm trying to bust up a crack ring here, and I need a break. I found the basement door open at four o'clock this morning. There wasn't anything I could do for the barber, but I wanted those keys."

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"So you searched his apartment, but you put off checking this place until tonight because somebody might have seen you in here by the dawn's early light. Did you ever hear of such a thing as a search warrant? Any evidence you find in here might as well be on the moon for all the good it's going to do you in court."

"This is just preliminary. When I get a lead, I'll apply for a warrant. By the way, where's your warrant?"

"In my pocket. Issued by Judge Zefirelli at five-thirty this afternoon. For the entire building."

Stilcho swore and edged toward the door. Auburn followed his movement with his revolver.

"Will you put that thing away?"

Instead of complying, Auburn searched Stilcho. "No weapon . . . no badge," he murmured to himself.

"Get a grip, Auburn. When you go undercover you don't wear a tin star."

"Then you probably aren't carrying a key for these, either, are you? Move on out into the shop."

"If you try to put those cuffs on me, I'll kick your head off." But he moved.

"One cuff. The other one goes on the arm of this chair."

"What in this world do you think you're going to do now?"

"Some searching of my own, up the street. I'll be back."

He went out into the alley again. Harry's truck was parked close to the building, its hood cold. He didn't waste time feeling the hoods of the other vehicles parked there, an omission that almost proved fatal.

The back door to Maynard's Vegetarian Diner was flanked by empty cardboard cartons and plastic containers stacked shoulder-high against the outside wall. With a little difficulty Auburn found the right key and slipped into the diner. There was much less light here than in the barbershop, because the streetlight on the corner was farther away and there were venetian blinds on the front windows.

Auburn found himself in a passage not more than two feet wide, with restrooms on one side and a dishwashing bay on the other. After advancing a couple of paces, he turned back to secure the door. That abrupt change of direction probably saved his life. Something hurtled past his head in the dark like a cannonball and struck the cheap paneling a few inches from his head with a splintering crash.

He wheeled and dropped to one knee, snapping on the flashlight in his left hand and bringing out his weapon with his right. The light caught Orrel Maynard in the act of recovering his balance and getting ready for another swing with a long-handled cast-iron skillet. "Drop it and put your hands over your head," suggested Auburn.

Maynard staggered against the wall and squinted into the glare

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of the flashlight. "Hey, is that you, Officer? I didn't hurt you, did I?" He dropped the skillet noisily to the floor but didn't raise his hands.

"Get them up, Maynard," said Auburn. "You're under arrest for the murder of Leroy Callard." He intoned the Miranda litany.

"What murder? Hey, the guy was asking for it, poking around in here last night in the dark. I thought he was a prowler."

"So you brained him with a frying pan, like you tried to brain me just now, and then a couple hours later, when the street was empty, you dragged him down to the basement and faked up an accident."

Maynard had grudgingly raised his hands to shoulder height, and was now slumped against the doorway to the dishwashing bay, where cutlery gleamed within his reach. In the tricky light and narrow quarters, Auburn trusted him about as much as he would have trusted a cornered rattlesnake. But his handcuffs were on duty up the street.

"I'll tell you exactly how it happened," said Maynard. "It looks bad, I know, but I never meant to kill anybody."

"Save your story for a minute. There's somebody else I want to hear it. Have you got a coat?"

"There on the chair." Maynard evinced a certain eagerness to leave the premises.

Auburn turned on the light in the passage and stuck his flashlight in his pocket. "Put it on," he said. "Very carefully. Sometimes when my hand's cold my fingers twitch." He shepherded Maynard into the alley, locked the diner, and led him to the back door of the barbershop. They found Stilcho trying to take apart the chair to which Auburn had cuffed him with a pair of barber's scissors.

"Hey, I know you," babbled Maynard. "What'd he pinch you for, stealing talcum powder?"

Stilcho maintained a malignant silence.

"I caught him snooping around in here a few minutes ago," explained Auburn. "He may be just a cheap hood, but he'll do for a witness." After repeating the Miranda formula, he invited Maynard to tell his story.

Maynard sat in one of a row of battered tubular steel chairs along the wall and tried not to notice the revolver in Auburn's hand. "A couple weeks ago I got the idea somebody was getting into my place at night and messing around with things."

"Did you report that to the police?"

"No, sir. I wasn't sure. I thought I'd stake out the place myself and see what developed. Last night, half an hour after I locked up, in walks this guy with a key like he owned the place—"

"He did."

"I couldn't tell who he was in the dark. All I knew was that somebody was rooting around in my kitchen that didn't have any business being there. When I went in after him, he picked up a fil-

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leting knife and tried to fillet me. I hit him in the head with a skillet—purely in self-defense, I swear. He went down like he was shot. I must have caught him on a soft spot or something.

"I looked him over and saw that it was Leroy, and then I looked some more and saw that he was dead. I figured it didn't look too good, me killing my landlord over there in the middle of the night, so I decided to get out of the picture and make it look like an accident. I let him lie there in the kitchen while I thought over how to do it.

"After a couple of hours, when the traffic stopped outside, I got the keys out of his pocket and unlocked the basement. From my front door to the basement entrance is ten steps. I was going to tumble him down the stairs, make it look like he slipped and fell. But then I said, what the heck, I can do better than that. Nobody's going to believe Leroy's such a jerk that he got killed taking a header down his own basement steps in the middle of the night.

"One of the light bulbs down there was burned out. I put Leroy on the floor underneath it, laid the ladder down next to him, and shoved a new bulb under him, to make it look like he was changing the bulb and got a shock and fell."

"You wore gloves?" said Auburn, his tone more declarative than interrogative.

"Plastic gloves, like we have to wear when we handle food."

"Tell us about the puddle."

Maynard blinked. "I poured a little water out of a bucket to make a puddle where the ladder would have been sitting."

"Did you change the wiring on the lights?"

"No, sir. I was in the basement maybe four, five minutes. I didn't touch any wiring."

Auburn took out his own keys. "Come over here," he instructed Maynard. "Give me your hand. No, the other one."

Auburn released the cuff from the arm of the barber chair and transferred it to Maynard's wrist, so that, before either of them quite knew what was happening, he and Stilcho were manacled together with their wrists joined under the arm of the chair. He put away his revolver and frisked Maynard, finding nothing lethal or incriminating.

Then he pulled out the search warrant and held it where Maynard could read it. "Just so you know that I convinced a judge this afternoon—yesterday afternoon—that I had probable cause to search your place," he said.

Maynard had seemed eager before to draw Auburn away from the diner, and surprisingly voluble in confessing to manslaughter and associated chicanery. Now he fumed and squirmed at the idea that Auburn was going back to search the diner. "Search for what? I already told you exactly what happened."

"And I believed you. The prosecutor probably will, too. He might

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try for manslaughter if he's feeling lucky the day you come up for trial. But what I want to know is what you've got stashed in that kitchen that's such a precious secret. You killed a man last night to keep him from finding it, and you were on guard in there again tonight because you didn't know who had Callard's keys."

Maynard, speechless with anger and alarm, threw open his coat with his free hand and clawed at his throat as if he were choking.

Auburn went back to the diner, put on the lights in the kitchen, and went to work. Most of the containers on the shelves held prefabricated items—tomato sauce, fruit cocktail, salad dressings, soup concentrates, and the like. A short-order cook doesn't have time to make things from scratch. But on one of the shelves Auburn had noticed, the day before, row upon row of boxes of baking soda—the standard reagent used to turn powdered cocaine hydrochloride into crack.

Several of the boxes in the rearmost row had had their flaps opened and tucked back in. On investigating these, Auburn found that they contained irregular chunks of brittle, off-white material, like fragments of hard candy or broken teeth. He called headquarters before returning to the barbershop.

Stilcho and Maynard weren't speaking, or even looking at each other. Exercising great caution, Auburn released Stilcho and cuffed Maynard to the arm of the chair. Then he led Stilcho back to the office and closed the door.

"Let me lay some facts on you, Gary," he said. "No matter what you or I do, the feds are going to take this case away from Public Safety. But if you help me run Maynard in tonight, your picture's going to be on TV and in the papers tomorrow. Every pusher and racketeer and creep within fifty miles will know your mug. Once we're allowed to mention your name around headquarters again, you'll be washed up for undercover work. You'll have to start shaving again, showing up for morning report . . ."

By the time the backup squad arrived, Stilcho had vanished into the night.

Auburn spent some time at the scene helping the others to gather evidence and then, dead tired, he took Maynard to headquarters and saw him booked for manslaughter. While waiting for his lawyer to arrive, he led Maynard into the squad room.

It was almost eight A.M. Lieutenant Savage, whose office was still in the hands of the painters, was working at a table there, sorting through a sheaf of bulletins in preparation for morning report while taking short sips from a Styrofoam cup with the string of a tea bag hanging out of it. He looked up at Auburn and his prisoner and did a double take.

"You need a shave, Cy. Not to mention a shine, and a coat with a few buttons left on it. Who's our guest?"

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Auburn was slap-happy with fatigue. "This is your left-handed Irishman, Lieutenant. He's the one who plucked the pear down in the basement of . . ."

Savage's silent glare of disapproval suggested that he wasn't in the mood for frivolity at this hour

"Mr. Maynard runs the diner next to Callard's barbershop," Auburn explained. "He found Callard prowling around his kitchen, hit him over the head with a skillet and killed him, and then put his body in the basement and faked the electric-shock thing."

"Where's his lawyer?"

"On the way. So are Flynn and Michelwicz."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Because Mr. Maynard has been using his kitchen to whip up batches of crack in his spare time."

Savage stared hard at Auburn. "Anybody with you on this arrest?"

"Nobody I could mention." ●

Perfect Crime

by Bill Huntley

The perfect crime dressed in black
Skin-tight cool in a red Cadillac
Stiletto heel spiked to the mat
Ruby-tipped toes, pedal flat

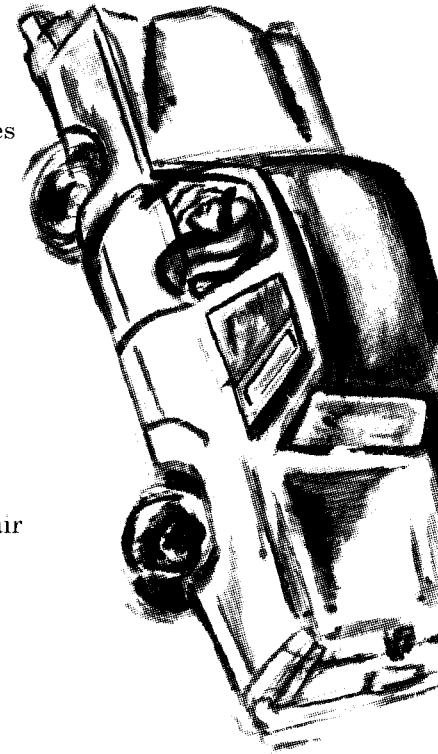
Rubber squealing, dangerous curves
Bored indifference, flawless nerves
Rearview mirror, check her face
Flashing lights keeping pace

Country road, Sunday ride
Black-and-white right 'long side
Sideways glance, inclined stare
Finger pointing—OVER THERE!

Coy confusion, response to cue
Who, me—? YEAH, YOU!
Window open, elbow out
Moist red lips, sinful pout

Shades thrown back in jet-black hair
Looking up without a care
Ruby nail parts ruby lips
Smoky bear, hands on hips

Ice-pick eyes, bloody haze
Impales her prey with just a gaze
Tip o' the hat, willing prey
Howdy ma'am, have a nice day



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Art by Laurie Harden

The Theft of the Double Elephant

by Edward D. Hoch

James Bartram was a collector, but a frugal one. He liked to tell his friends that the framed paintings on his walls were all inexpensive prints and the books in his library included no first editions of any value. Helen Nesbett, the attractive dark-haired teacher he'd been seeing since his wife left him six months earlier, had remarked, "You'd have a fortune in these Audubons alone if they were originals."

"Marry me," he said with a smile, "and I'll give you an original Audubon for a wedding present."

"That would almost be worth it."

"Almost but not quite?"

She laughed. It was part of their game, and they'd been playing it almost since their first meeting. "I don't want to make the same mistake Monica did."

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"You wouldn't."

"If she couldn't tame you, neither could I."

Bartram lived on the top floor of a brownstone in Manhattan's fashionable Turtle Bay area. There was no way up to his fifth-floor apartment except a set of stairs that was walled in from the apartment on the lower floors. Its inconvenience contributed to the reasonable rent, making it affordable for someone of his modest means. On summer nights he'd sit out on the rear balcony, watching the ground-floor tenants, who were allowed access to the Turtle Bay gardens enclosed by the block of brownstones.

Nick Velvet, our readers' favorite Edward D. Hoch character, also seems to have a special appeal for filmmakers. Once the basis for a series on French TV, the Velvet stories and character have been under option in the United States for either TV or film for the better part of the past three decades. Let's hope 2004 is the year in which we finally see the lovable thief on U.S. TV, or on the silver screen. ✝

Because of their many fashionable residents, security was tight in the brownstones. Bartram had to pass through three locked doors to reach his apartment. There was the outer street door, the door at the bottom of the stairway, and another door toward the top, on the landing just below his apartment. To this one he'd taken the added precaution of affixing a burglar alarm, to go off if the door was opened during the night. A similar alarm was attached to the sliding doors onto the balcony.

After Helen wakened him to say she was leaving, shortly after midnight, he locked the doors behind her and set the alarm. It was an ongoing battle to get her to stay overnight, but she claimed to have a roommate who was nervous about being alone. "She's from Indiana," Helen had explained, "and this is her first year in the big city. Besides, I don't think we should get too serious."

Sometimes he wondered if it was their age difference that bothered her. At fifty-seven he was almost twenty years older—old enough to be her father, she liked to remind him from time to time. He thought about that as he turned out the lights and headed for the bedroom, pausing for one more look at the bright scarlet bird on the life-size print of Audubon's "Greater Flamingo." Then he checked the sliding doors to the balcony to make certain they were locked and the alarm was on.

He slept well, as he usually did. When he awakened shortly before the clock radio went on at seven, he remembered that he'd be working at home that day with no need to travel down Lexington Avenue to his editorial office. Still, he got up and showered, following his usual routine. It was when he stepped into the living

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room on his way to the kitchen that he saw the gaping bare spot on the wall. The framed print of the "Greater Flamingo" was missing. In its place, taped neatly to the wall, was a calling card:

THE WHITE QUEEN
Impossible Things Before Breakfast

Nick Velvet had met James Bartram once or twice at the yacht club where he and Gloria sailed during the summer months. They'd never discussed Nick's line of work, but somehow he wasn't surprised to learn that Bartram knew how he earned his living. Seated now in the editor's Manhattan apartment on a sunny June afternoon, he could only wonder why he'd been summoned.

"I'll come right to the point," Bartram said, brushing the strands of hair back on his balding head. "A thief known as the White Queen has stolen my double elephant. I want you to steal it back." He tossed her calling card on the desk between them.

"I'm familiar with the White Queen," Nick admitted, recognizing and picking up the card. "Sandra Paris by name. She's the best female thief in the business. But what in heaven's name is a double elephant?"

James Bartram motioned toward the framed prints on the far wall. Many were of birds and mammals, done in the distinctive Audubon style that even Nick could recognize. "Most of these are prints of John James Audubon's best work. That blank space at the center contained a double-elephant print of his 'Greater Flamingo.'" All that remained in the space he indicated were two heavy-duty spikes that looked as if they could support the Brooklyn Bridge. "You see, Audubon insisted that each bird he drew be depicted life-size in the original edition of *Birds of America.* That was no problem with smaller birds. He used twenty-two-by-twenty-eight-inch sheets termed 'elephant paper' by the printers. But for big birds like pelicans and long-necked birds like flamingos, egrets, and swans, it presented a real problem."

Nick could see it coming. "Double elephants."

"Exactly! The sheets measured twenty-six by thirty-nine inches! Can you imagine a book that size? I specialize in editing so-called coffee-table books for the holiday trade, but I've never attempted anything approaching Audubon's Double Elephant Folio. When completed, it ran to seven volumes and took eleven years to publish. The price was one thousand dollars, a small fortune in eighteen thirty-eight. Today, one set in England has been valued at seven million pounds."

Nick Velvet sighed. "My problem is that I don't steal anything of great value, and Sandra Paris wouldn't have stolen it in the first place unless it was valuable."

"They're prints, not originals! I can show you the catalogue. A

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double-elephant print of the flamingo goes for two hundred and fifty dollars. Mine is in a plain black frame, with no glass over the print."

"Then you're wasting your time with me. I charge fifty thousand dollars. For that you could buy two hundred prints and paper your apartment with them."

"I need this one back," Bartram insisted. "It's worth fifty grand to me."

"Half in advance?"

"Half in advance," he agreed. "I can show you a picture of what it looks like." He went to the bookcase and took down a Library of America edition of Audubon's writings and drawings. The "Greater Flamingo" proved to be a long-legged bird of bright scarlet, standing on a rocky shoreline. Its neck was twisted down so that the dark beak was almost in the water. "He drew the neck down so he could fit it on the page," the editor explained.

"I thought flamingos were pink," Nick said.

"They're near white at birth, then turn pink, and gradually darken to this full scarlet color by age two."

To Nick, the awkward angle of the bird was anything but graceful. He supposed it was the vivid scarlet coloring that had rated the print its central position on Bartram's wall. "All right," he decided. "If it's worth that much to you, I'll steal it back from the White Queen. First I'd better have a look around your apartment, to figure out how she did it."

"If you can determine that, you're better than I am. This thing is simply impossible!"

"The missing print was here last night, correct?"

"Correct."

"You were alone in the apartment?"

"I was entertaining a lady friend."

"Name?"

"Helen Nesbett. She teaches at the Fashion Institute. I met her last fall at a book-launch party."

"Are you close, sleeping together?"

The editor nodded. "I've asked her to marry me, but thus far she's declined."

"Tell me everything that happened the night the print was stolen."

"Well, I was dozing a bit after midnight when Helen woke me to say she was going home. It was no surprise. She never stayed over. I saw her to the door, locked up, and made sure the alarm was on. I also checked the lock and alarm on the terrace door."

"The Audubon print was still there?"

"That's right. I saw it as I returned to the bedroom."

"And you heard nothing during the night?"

"Not a thing. The locks and alarms hadn't been tampered with. If

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this White Queen got in, she must have walked through the wall."

"If anyone could do that, Sandra Paris could. Let me take a look around."

Bartram showed him the locks and burglar alarms, and then took him out on the terrace overlooking the Turtle Bay Gardens five floors below. "Only the ground-floor residents have access to the gardens," he explained. "There is no public access from the streets. These brownstones were built in eighteen twenty and restored a hundred years later, when the back gardens were combined into a single community garden. As you can see, access to this apartment from the ground would be virtually impossible. Even the nearest tree is too far away. Of course, only these walls separate the terraces on either side from me, but both neighbors are long-time residents who heard nothing on the night of the robbery. And, of course, the lock and burglar alarm were both in place on these terrace doors."

Still, Nick knelt and examined the terrace's wrought-iron railing, noting a bit of rubbing against the black metal. It might be something, it might be nothing. His next move was to contact the White Queen. "All right," he told Bartram. "Remember, I'll need half of my fee in advance."

"Of course," the editor said.

Sandra Paris and Nick Velvet had started out as enemies, then turned into grudging accomplices and finally friends. Recently, however, they'd drifted apart. It had been more than two years since they'd been together, on a caper at a Texas wild-animal ranch. Now, when he phoned her unlisted number, he had to identify himself to her answering machine. "It's Nick, Sandra. Nick Velvet. It's been a long time. Give me a call when you can. Maybe we can have lunch."

After he'd hung up, Gloria asked, "What are you going to tell her?"

He shrugged. "The truth. That I've been hired to steal back the double elephant."

Sandra called the next morning and they arranged to meet at the Sheep Meadow Cafe in Central Park. A casual outdoor setting seemed best for their meeting. "You're looking good, Nick," she said after he'd ordered a beer for himself and white wine for her. He glanced over the luncheon menu without really seeing it and turned his attention to her. She didn't need to be told she looked good. With her long platinum-blond hair, perfect cheekbones, and soft doe eyes set off by dark brows, she could still turn heads even at age forty. Years ago Sandra had had a brief career as an actress before turning to her more profitable specialty, and there were times even now when Nick suspected she was still a pretty good actress.

"I've been exercising," he told her. "What about you? Keeping busy?"

She shrugged. "A few jobs here and there."

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"Like the double elephant?"

Her expression never changed. "No more animals for me after our Texas escapade."

"You know what I'm talking about, Sandra. You left your calling card."

"Did I? Anyone can have those printed up."

"It was your sort of job—a valuable print stolen before breakfast."

"Valuable! That picture wasn't worth—" She stopped in mid sentence, suddenly aware that he'd tricked her.

"He's hired me to steal it back from you," he told her.

"Who? Bartram? At your usual fee?"

"That's right."

"Nick, that print's only worth a few hundred dollars."

"Do you still have it?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he added, "I'll give you ten thousand for it. Right now."

She took a sip of her wine. "If it's worth that much to you it's worth twice as much to me. After all, I did the heavy lifting."

"How'd you swing it?"

She smiled. "Trade secret, Nick. You know how it is."

"Someone must have hired you."

"Let's forget about it and just have lunch, shall we?"

Nick had little choice. She wasn't going to talk and there was no easy way to learn the print's present location from her. Chances were she'd already delivered it to her client in order to collect her fee. That's what Nick would have done.

Still, that wasn't earning him his fifty grand. After lunch, he and Sandra parted and he went for a walk alone in Central Park. He could be pretty certain of two things. The person who'd hired Sandra Paris had to know something about that double-elephant print, about what made it so valuable. And her client was in a position that made it impossible to steal the print personally. Taken together, those two facts indicated someone who'd once been close to James Bartram but no longer was.

Someone like an ex-wife.

Monica Bartram. Nick had seen her once at the yacht club with her husband, but they'd never actually met. She was in her fifties, close to Bartram's age, at a point in her life when divorce might easily result in vengefulness.

It took him only a few minutes on the computer to discover her current address, a high-rise apartment on Union Square. He phoned and represented himself as an insurance investigator, certain that she wouldn't remember him from the yacht club. "This is about an insurance claim made by your former husband," he said. "It'll only take a few minutes of your time."

"Can't we do it over the phone?" she asked, sounding annoyed.

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"I want you to identify a picture."

"Oh, all right. I can give you five minutes."

The doorman announced him and Nick arrived in a charcoal-gray suit with a briefcase bulked up by a phone book. Monica Bartram was waiting for him at the door. "You're Mr. Nicholas?"

"That's right. Thank you for seeing me, Mrs. Bartram." Whatever beauty she might have had in her younger days had faded with time. Nick hoped she'd done well in the divorce settlement.

She led him into a plainly furnished living room. "What's the problem with James now?"

"His Turtle Bay apartment was robbed. Someone stole the Audubon double-elephant print of a red flamingo."

"That isn't worth anything," she scoffed. "He bought it for a couple of hundred dollars just before we split up."

"Did he have it on the wall then?"

"He was waiting to have it framed, but he wanted it as his centerpiece."

"Was this the print?" he asked, taking a catalogue photo of it from his briefcase.

"That's it. Not a graceful drawing at all. He only wanted it because of its size. Audubon's Double Elephant Folio is something of a dream to people like James who edit coffee-table books." She hesitated a moment and then asked, "How much had he insured it for?"

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"What? I can't believe that!" She seemed genuinely surprised at the figure.

"Do you know of anyone who might have wanted to steal it?"

"My husband was involved with some shady people. A few years back he published a coffee-table book about Colombian fishermen. It had some lovely photographs of fishing boats heading out at sunrise, that sort of thing. It was during this period that he met some Colombians. He seemed to have new money after that, and once I caught him trying cocaine."

"He's a drug addict?"

"I can't go that far, but it was one of the reasons for our breakup. That and the women." She was pouring it all out to a perfect stranger, as she must have done many times since the divorce.

"Was there one particular woman?" Nick asked.

She dismissed the question with a wave of her hand. "There was always someone younger. I was too old for him, too plain. He didn't want to be reminded of his own age."

Nick got to his feet. "I'd better be going. You promised me only five minutes of your time. I just needed confirmation that he owned the Audubon print."

She nodded and waved him away, head down. Perhaps she was already regretting what she'd told him.

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Bartram's connection with Colombians, possibly drug dealers, had changed several aspects of the assignment. It now seemed possible that the double-elephant print contained information about drugs, or small quantities of the narcotics themselves. Still, a quantity of illegal drugs had to be fairly sizable to be worth more than fifty thousand dollars. Hiding it behind a print or even in its frame seemed highly unlikely. And if Monica Bartram had paid Sandra to steal it, she'd hardly have been so open to Nick about the drugs.

Perhaps he'd have to look further for the White Queen's client.

He called the Fashion Institute, where Bartram's girlfriend, Helen Nesbett, was an instructor. The Institute was closed for summer vacation and the office assistant had no intention of giving out Miss Nesbett's home address or phone number. It didn't take long for Nick to locate both of them, but a call to her Upper West Side apartment brought only a recorded answering machine greeting in a stilted male voice. He hung up without leaving a message.

He had to face it. Sandra Paris was the only lead he had, and she wasn't talking.

The following morning he had a call from James Bartram. "How's it going?" his client asked without preamble.

"Taking me a bit longer than I'd expected," Nick admitted.

"Look, I've got some people breathing down my neck. Have you located the White Queen?"

"I had lunch with her yesterday."

"You what?"

"Had lunch with her. But she's not admitting a thing and not about to tell me who paid her."

Bartram sighed. "I don't care how you do it, but I must have that print back by tomorrow morning. If it takes some . . . violence, I'll pay extra."

"I don't work that way," Nick told him.

"Just get it back to me by tomorrow morning."

"You could help me a great deal by telling me who it is that's breathing down your neck."

He hesitated and then said, "I'd made arrangements to sell the print to a collector in South America."

"Colombia?"

"Well, yes." He was nervous now. "I can't talk anymore. I'll be working at my apartment in the morning. Phone me before you come over."

Nick hung up and sat staring at the phone, convinced that Colombian drugs were involved. But why would Bartram or anyone else be trying to smuggle drugs *into* Colombia?

Nick remembered a security man at an Atlantic City casino, the

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first time he'd met Sandra Paris. His name was Charlie Weston and he'd played a part in her arrest for stealing a roulette wheel. She'd gotten off with a short prison term. Weston had moved to New York and was a detective sergeant now. But Nick had heard that he still kept an eye on the White Queen.

It took him a couple of hours to track Weston down and arrange a meeting after work. "You coming in to surrender, Nick?" the balding detective wanted to know when they met at a pizza joint across the street from his precinct station.

"Charlie, Charlie! I'm clean. I live up in Westchester and go to church every Sunday."

"Sure you do, Nick. That's why you were having lunch in Central Park yesterday with a convicted felon."

"You've got a tail on me?" he asked, showing his surprise.

"No, we've got a tail on Sandra Paris, which is a tough assignment the way she's always changing her appearance."

"I wanted to ask you about Sandra. What's she up to these days?"

"Beats me. She's been quiet too long. She may be working a scam at one of the Connecticut casinos."

"Nothing in town here?"

Weston looked exasperated. "What? Do I report to you now instead of my lieutenant?"

"Just wondering what you've heard. I sort of look out for her and someone told me she's been seen with some Colombians."

"Believe me, Sandra Paris can look out for herself. We haven't seen her with any Colombians or we'd have hauled her in for questioning. Last fall she was seen hanging around Forty-seventh Street, the diamond district, and we thought she was planning something. But nothing came of it."

"Hanging around? What does that mean?"

"She had dinner with a man named Walt Concius. He has a small refinery on the street."

"Refinery?" Nick questioned.

"He refines precious metals for use in jewelry. We thought she might be planning to rip him off, but nothing came of it. You can't arrest people for having dinner together."

Nick smiled. "Thanks for the information, anyway."

"It's a two-way street, Velvet. I expect something in return."

"I'll keep you in mind," he promised.

Nick took a taxi to West 47th Street and strolled among the jewelry stores and diamond dealers until he came to Concius Refiners in the middle of the block. It was upstairs over a small co-op where a number of jewelers rented space. Walt Concius, a smiling man with a gold tooth, came out to greet him and shook hands. "What can I do for you, Mr. Nicholas?"

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"I'm getting some estimates on a piece of jewelry for my wife. It's our twenty-fifth anniversary coming up."

"A special occasion," Concius agreed. He pulled a thick catalogue from under the counter.

"I've tried a couple of other places but they were unsatisfactory. Sandra Paris suggested you might be able to help me."

Nick was hoping the name would at least bring a raised eyebrow, but it seemed to mean nothing to the man. "I have many customers," he said with a shrug. "Sometimes I forget names."

"Quite attractive, platinum-blond hair. She said she had dinner with you."

"She must be mistaken. I'm sure I would have remembered that." He opened the catalogue. "What price range did you have in mind?"

"Fifty thousand," Nick replied without hesitation.

"One main stone or several small ones?"

"That depends upon what you can do with the setting. I'd want twenty-four-carat gold, of course."

Walt Concius seemed to grow a bit irritated. "I have a smelter here, Mr. Nicholas. I can shape gold any way you want it."

Nick pretended some hesitation. "I'd better think it over and come back."

"You do that, sir," he said dismissively.

Nick was beginning to think he'd made a mistake mentioning Sandra's name. Perhaps he'd even placed her in some danger. He left the upstairs office quickly and walked west to Sixth Avenue. The June afternoon had turned unusually warm and he decided he might think well over a cool beer. It was early enough that the bar was almost empty and he sat alone with his thoughts.

He was pretty certain he knew what Sandra had really stolen, but he didn't know how. More important, he didn't know where it was at that moment. And his client needed the double elephant returned by the following morning. He'd taken out his wallet to pay for the beer when he found the White Queen's calling card that she'd left on the wall of Bartram's apartment. Something—

"Do you have a match?" he asked the bartender.

"No smoking in here, sir."

"I just want a match. I'll smoke outside."

The bartender dug around by the cash register and came up with a half-used matchbook. When he moved down to the other end of the bar, Nick lit a match and held it to a corner of Sandra's card.

It didn't burn.

Nick phoned a realtor who handled apartment leases and rentals. "I'm looking for something in Turtle Bay," he told the man, who'd helped him in the past.

"Most everything in the Turtle Bay District is either owner-

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occupied or on a long-term lease. We rarely have anything there unless somebody dies."

"I know someone who sublet a ground-floor apartment earlier this year. I'm wondering if that might be available."

"I'll see what I can find out from the management people and call you back."

It was almost five before the realtor returned his call. "There's an actress has a place on the East Forty-eighth Street side, ground floor. She's doing a play in London and sublet it to someone for six months. The time's almost up, but she's coming back in July, so the place isn't available."

"Who'd want to come back to New York in July? Can you give me the address?"

The man on the other end of the line hesitated. "You owe me, Nick."

Nick jotted down the address and thanked him.

During the rush hour, when the streets were crowded, he circled the Turtle Bay block, getting some idea of the locks and alarm systems. In his business it was an advantage when most people advertised their security systems with a brand name. At the number he sought, on East 48th Street, he saw no sign of movement behind the wooden shutters, which were partly open. He kept walking. The security system was a familiar one, a good one, but he didn't think he'd need to outwit it. Outwitting Sandra Paris was much more fun.

He waited till it was nearly dark and called her number on his cell phone. As usual, he got the answering machine. "Sandra, this is Nick. I wanted you to know I stumbled across that double-elephant thing in your apartment on East Forty-eighth Street. You were right—it's damned heavy. I didn't want you to think you were robbed by a stranger."

Then he hung up and took a position in a doorway down the street from the apartment. He waited just forty minutes before a taxi stopped at the corner of Third Avenue, dropping off a dark-haired woman who strode quickly down the block. She went down a few steps to the brownstone's entrance and fitted a key into the lock. That was when Nick moved.

She was just pushing open the door when he came up fast behind her, shoving her inside. "You can take off the black wig, Sandra. I'd know you anywhere."

Inside the apartment, her face was ashen with fury. "Damn you, Nick! I fell for the oldest trick in the world!"

"Calm down. You know I could have gotten past this security system if I had to."

"But it was easier for you to trick me into coming down here to

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check on the print."

"Maybe I just wanted to see you again," Nick said with a smile.

"Sure!"

He flipped on the light switch and motioned toward a rectangular object covered with a sheet. "Is that the double elephant?"

"Look for yourself."

He did just that, pulling off the sheet to reveal the missing print of Audubon's scarlet flamingo. He lifted one end. "It's heavy," he agreed. He took out a penknife and scratched some of the paint from the black frame.

"Yes," she told him, "the frame is pure gold. But how could you possibly know?"

"You joked about doing the heavy lifting when you stole it, and I noticed two strong spikes in Bartram's wall to support it. Yet it was only a paper print, without even a glass covering. I wondered what made it so heavy, until I heard you were seen having dinner with a metal refiner from Forty-seventh Street. Bartram told me he had a buyer for the print in Colombia, which seemed odd indeed. He wouldn't be trying to smuggle drugs into Colombia, but it occurred to me he could be an important link in a money-laundering scheme. Getting payment for the drugs back to Colombia has always been a problem, and what better way than converting it to gold and reworking it into innocent shapes like picture frames? There was only the weight to give it away."

"How could you have known it was here?"

"I had to figure out how you stole it. The thing seemed impossible, but that's your motto, isn't it? 'Impossible things before breakfast.' The toughest part was determining how you gained access to Bartram's apartment during the night, past those locks and alarms, without disturbing him. Of course, I was looking at the whole thing backwards. You were already inside, wearing that black wig, posing as Helen Nesbett from the Fashion Institute. There really is a Helen Nesbett on their faculty, but it's not you. You probably got the name off their Web page. You devoted six months to seducing Bartram and gaining access to his apartment, all so you could steal that print with the golden frame. I suppose that refiner, Walt Concius, is your client."

She shook her head. "I'm on my own on this, Nick. It's for me. Concius gave me a hint of what was going on and I followed it from there."

"Whatever," he said, only half believing her. "I imagine you arrived at Bartram's place the other night with a fifty-foot rope wound around your waist along with a rolled-up copy of the flamingo print. After he dozed off, you carried the double elephant onto the terrace and carefully lowered it in the dark to the garden below. There was evidence of the rope having rubbed the iron railing. Then you locked the terrace doors and reset the alarm. On the

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wall you placed a life-size photograph of the flamingo with a black frame painted in, printed on flash paper like magicians use. Underneath was your calling card, sprayed with a fire retardant so it wouldn't catch fire when you set off the flash-paper photo by remote control. The tiny bug for your radio signal simply dropped to the floor unnoticed when the paper burned, and Bartram was left with your calling card instead of his print."

Sandra Paris sighed. "As I've told you before, Nick, we'd make a wonderful team."

"I knew there was no way out of the Turtle Bay gardens except through one of the ground-floor apartments, and I found the only one that had been sublet recently. So here I am."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Return the print to Bartram and collect my fee."

"Give him the print and we'll keep the frame."

Nick smiled and shook his head. "I don't do business like that. Want to help me carry it?"

"Nick, listen," she pleaded with him. "This is bigger than you realize. I didn't waste six months for just this one picture. This is just one link in a chain of money laundering that leads right back to Colombia. They're forming gold into belt buckles, wrenches, picture frames, anything you can imagine. Once in Colombia the gold is sold to refiners for cash and the whole cycle starts over."

"All right, I'll keep you out of it," he promised. "I'll phone Bartram and tell him to come over here and I'll give him the print."

"Then he'll know I'm involved. He'll know I was Helen Nesbett."

"Not if you're hiding in the next room."

He took out his cell phone and punched in Bartram's number. "Mr. Bartram? Nick here. I have the goods for you. I'm right around the corner on Forty-eighth Street." He gave the address. "Come over and you can pick it up."

"I'll be there in five minutes," he replied, sounding relieved.

"Don't forget the balance of my fee."

When he'd hung up, Sandra said, "I'm out of here!"

"Just hide in the bedroom. He's not going to search the place."

Five minutes later the doorbell chimed. Nick saw Bartram waiting and opened the door. He didn't see the man with a gun behind him until it was too late. Walt Concius pointed the Glock pistol at Nick's chest and shoved Bartram ahead of him into the apartment. "Well, it's Mr. Nicholas, isn't it?"

Nick shouldn't have been surprised that it was Concius putting the pressure on Bartram. Obviously his refinery was the key to the entire operation. "I'm just doing my job," he said. "The Audubon print is over there."

Concius checked out the framed print, noticing the scrapes on the painted frame. His gun was still pointed at Nick. "I told this

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fool not to leave the pictures hanging in his apartment for months on end before he shipped them south. Now what am I going to do about you?"

"One of you is going to pay me my fee, I know that."

"This is the only fee you'll get," Concius told him as he raised the gun a fraction of an inch.

That was when Sandra Paris walked out of the bedroom wearing her black wig. "James! What is this? Who is that man?"

Concius glanced toward her for just an instant, but that was all Nick needed. He hit the man hard, knocking him to the floor, and sent the gun spinning away with a well-aimed kick.

Bartram was still stunned by Sandra's presence. "Helen! What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story, James. You don't want to hear it."

But somehow it was all coming clear to him. "You stole the Audubon, didn't you? I don't know how, but you did it."

She gestured toward the floor, where Concius was just beginning to come around. "Your partner here told me about it. He suggested I steal it for him while it was in your possession, but the more I thought about it the more I decided to keep it for myself."

"Concius asked you to do that?"

"It was his idea, yes."

That was more than Bartram could cope with just then. He bent quickly to pick up the fallen gun, and would have shot Concius if Nick hadn't grabbed him, forcing his arm up. The shot went wild, shattering a front window of the apartment and setting off the alarm. "Come on!" Nick yelled to Sandra, yanking the gun from Bartram's hand. "Out the back way!"

He dropped the gun in the garden and they crossed to a lighted apartment on the other side where Sandra talked their way through with a report of a home invasion. The police were already arriving on 48th Street so their story had a ring of truth to it. They separated on 49th Street and went their own ways.

The following day Nick learned that the police had found Bartram and Concius wrestling on the floor. Both men were being held while police investigated an Audubon print in a gold frame, also found in the apartment.

"At least I got half my fee in advance," Nick told Gloria. "Sandra ended up with nothing, except the expense of subletting that apartment for six months."

Gloria thought about it, and about what Nick had told her of the Double Elephant Folio. "Nicky, did Audubon ever draw animals?"

"Yes. But he didn't insist that his quadruped reproductions be life-size."

"That's good, because if he ever drew an elephant—"

"I know. It wouldn't have fit on the double-elephant sheets." ●

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THE BANSHEE

by Peter Tremayne

"For three days the Banshee had been heard wailing outside his door at night. It was no surprise when his body was discovered. His time had come."

Sister Fidelma gazed at Brother Abán with surprise.

The elderly monk was sitting slightly forward on his chair, shivering a little although the day was not cold. His thin mouth trembled slightly; a fleck of spittle from one corner caught on the greying stubble of his unshaven chin. His pale eyes stood out in a bony, almost skeletal head over which the skin was stretched taut and parchment-like.

A Celtic scholar with many nonfiction books in print, Peter Tremayne has become equally well known as a spinner of tales set in medieval Ireland featuring series sleuth Sister Fidelma. A collection of the stories, *Whispers of the Dead,* is due to be released in May of 2004. Readers interested in seeing Fidelma in a book-length case should look for *Smoke in the Wind* (St. Martin's Press, July 2003). ¶

"He was fated to die," repeated the old man, almost petulantly. "You cannot deny the summons of the death wail."

Fidelma realised that the old man was troubled and he spoke with deadly seriousness. "Who heard this wailing?" she asked, trying to hide her natural scepticism.

The old man shivered. "Glass, the miller, whose house is not far away. And Bláth has confirmed that she was disturbed by the sounds."

Fidelma pursed her lips and expelled a little air through them in an almost soundless whistle. "I will speak with them later. Tell me what you know about this matter, Brother Abán. Just those facts that are known to you."

The elderly *religieux* sighed as if suppressing irritation. "I thought that you knew them. Surely my message was clear?"

"I was told that a man had been found dead in suspicious cir-

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cumstances. The messenger requested that the Chief Brehon of Cashel send a *dálaigh,* an officer of the court, to come and ascertain those circumstances. That is all I know so far, except that this man was named Ernán, that he was a farmer, and that he was found dead on the doorstep of his house with a jagged wound in his throat."

Fidelma spoke without irritation but precisely.

Brother Abán was suddenly defensive. "This is a peaceful spot. We are just a small farming community here by the banks of the Siúr River. Even nature bestows her blessings on us and that is why we call this place 'The Field of Honey.' Nothing like this has ever happened before."

"It would help if I knew exactly what has happened," murmured Fidelma. "So, tell me what you know."

"I am the only religious in this community," went on Brother Abán, as if ignoring her request. "I have been here forty years, tending to the spiritual needs of this little community. Never before . . ."

He fell silent a moment and Fidelma was forced to control her impatience and wait until the old man was ready to begin. "The facts?" he suddenly asked, his bright eyes upon her. "These are the facts. Yesterday morning I was at my morning prayers when Bláth came to my threshold, crying in a loud voice that Ernán had been found just outside the door of his house with his throat torn out. I went to his house and found this to be true. I then sent to Cashel for a *dálaigh."*

"What was so suspicious about the circumstances that you needed to do so?"

Brother Abán nervously rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Bláth told me . . ."

Fidelma held up a hand. "First, tell me exactly who Ernán was."

"Ernán was a young farmer who worked the lower fields along the riverbank. A handsome young man, married and without an enemy in the world. I knew his parents before they died. Good Christians leading blameless lives."

"And Bláth? Was she his wife?"

Brother Abán shook his head. "Ernán's wife was Blinne. Bláth is her sister. She lived with them. She helps about the farm. A good girl. She comes to sing the psalms in the chapel each week."

"And where was Blinne at this time?"

"Distraught. Beside herself with grief. She loved her husband very much."

"I see. And Bláth told you . . . what?"

"Bláth said that she had been awoken each of the last three nights hearing a terrible wailing outside the farmhouse."

"Did she investigate the cause of this sound?"

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The old monk laughed sarcastically. "This is a rural community. We live close to nature here. You do not go to investigate the wailing of a Banshee."

"Surely the new Faith has taught us not to be fearful of Otherworld creatures? As a Christian, do you really accept that there is a woman of the hills, a wraith, who comes to the threshold of a person about to die and then wails and laments in the middle of the night?" demanded Fidelma.

"As a Christian, I must. Do not the Holy Scriptures talk of spirits and ghosts who serve both God and Satan? Who knows which the woman of the hills serves? In the old days, it was said that the Banshee was a goddess who cared for a specific noble family and when their time came to be reborn in the Otherworld, the spirit would cry to announce their impending death in this world."

"I know the folklore," Fidelma said quietly.

"It is not to be dismissed," Brother Abán assured her earnestly. "When I was a small boy I heard a story from a neighbour. It seems that the time had come for his father, an old man, to pass on. A plaintive wailing was heard within the vicinity of their dwelling. The son went out the next morning and found a strange comb, which he picked up and took into the house. The following night the wailing returned but this time the doors and windows rattled as if someone was trying to get in.

"Realising it was the Banshee, the man placed the comb in a pair of tongs and held it out the window. Unseen hands seized the comb, and the tongs were twisted and bent out of recognition. Had he handed the comb out through the window, his arm would have been wrenched off. That is the power of the Banshee."

Fidelma dropped her gaze and tried to contain her smile. Obviously, Brother Abán was steeped in the old ways and superstitions. "Let us return to the case of Ernán," she suggested gently. "Are you saying that his sister-in-law, Bláth, heard this wailing and did so on three consecutive nights?"

"The third night was when Ernán was found dead."

"And Blinne had heard this wailing as well?"

"I only spoke to Glass the miller who confirmed that he had heard it also."

"So you have not spoken to Blinne, Ernán's wife?"

"She has not been well enough to speak with me, as you can imagine."

"Very well. Who discovered the body?"

"Bláth was up in the morning to milk the goats and found Ernán outside the house. He had been dead some hours. Bláth believes that—"

Fidelma held up her hand. "I will see what she believes when I speak with her. At this point, she came to you?"

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"That is right. I went to see the body while she went inside to comfort Blinne."

"Where is the body now?"

"In the chapel. We shall bury it tonight."

"I would like to examine this wound of which you speak."

Brother Abán stirred uncomfortably. "Is that necessary? After all, you are—"

"I am a *dálaigh* and used to such sights as the corpses of people who have died in violent ways."

The old monk shrugged. "It is not often that you would see the corpse of one who has been taken by the Banshee," he muttered.

"Has there been much wolf activity in these parts recently?"

The question was innocent enough, but Brother Abán realised what she was implying and he pulled a sour face. "You will not be able to pass off this death as a wolf attack, Sister," he said. "I know the marks made by a wolf when it is driven to attack a human. A wolf rarely attacks a full-grown man, a strong and muscular man. And the wailing was certainly not that of a wolf. You will have to think again if you want to dismiss this death as having a rational cause."

"I want to find the truth, that is all," Fidelma replied evenly. "Now let us inspect the corpse."

The old monk had been right that Ernán had been young and handsome in life. He was obviously well muscled and strong. The only disfigurement on his body was the jagged wound beneath his chin, which severed his windpipe and arteries. Fidelma bent forward and saw immediately that no teeth marks could have made the wound. It had been made by something sharp, although it had been drawn across the throat, tearing the flesh rather than cutting cleanly.

She straightened up after her inspection.

"Well?" demanded the old man.

"Ernán was certainly attacked, but not by some Otherworld entity," she said softly.

She led the way out of the small chapel and stood in the sunshine looking down through the collection of buildings to where the broad expanse of river was pushing sedately along, glistening and flickering in the bright light. There were several dwellings clustered around, including a blacksmith's forge and grain stores. The main part of the community dwelt in outlying farmsteads and would probably be in the fields at this time. However, there were a few people about. The blacksmith stood deep in conversation with someone who had in tow a thick-legged workhorse, and Fidelma could see a couple of people at the far end of the square just emerging around the corner of a storehouse. One was an attractive woman with auburn hair, young and pretty and slim. Her

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companion was a young man, long-faced, intense.

Fidelma's keen eyes deduced that neither was happy. The young man was stretching out a hand to the woman's arm in an almost imploring gesture. The woman seemed irritable and knocked the hand away, turning swiftly and striding towards the chapel. The young man gazed after her for a moment, then seemed to notice Fidelma and walked rapidly away, disappearing behind the far building.

"Interesting," muttered Fidelma. "Who are they? The woman seems to be coming here."

Brother Abán, standing at her shoulder, whispered: "This is Blinne, the widow of Ernán."

"And who was the young man with whom she seemed annoyed?"

"That was Tadhg. He is a . . . he is a bard."

Fidelma's lower lip thrust out a moment in amusement at the disapproval in the old man's voice. "That is appropriate."

The name Tadhg meant "poet."

Brother Abán was already moving to greet the woman called Blinne.

"How are you, my child?"

"Only as can be expected," Blinne replied shortly. Fidelma noticed that her face seemed an expressionless mask. Her lips were thinned in the set of her jaw. She had a tight control of her emotions. Her hazel eyes caught those of Sister Fidelma and her chin came up defiantly. "I have come to see the body of Ernán one last time. And Bláth says that she will sing the *caoine,* the keening at the interment."

"Of course, my child, of course," muttered the old monk. Then he remembered his manners. "This is Sister Fidelma from Cashel. She is—"

"I know who she is," replied the young woman coldly. "She is sister to our king as well as being a *dálaigh."*

"She has come to inquire into the death of your husband."

Was there a slight blush on Blinne's cheek?

"So I have heard. The news is all around the community."

"I am sorry for your troubles, Blinne," Fidelma greeted her softly. "When you have finished," she nodded imperceptibly to the chapel, "I would like to ask you a few questions."

"I understand."

"I shall be at Brother Abán's dwelling."

It was not long before Blinne came to Brother Abán's threshold.

Fidelma bade her be seated and turned to the old monk. "I think you said you had something to attend to in the chapel?" she suggested pointedly.

"No, I . . . " Brother Abán caught her gaze and then nodded swiftly. "Of course. I shall be there if you need me."

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After he had left, Fidelma took her seat opposite the attractive young woman. "This must be distasteful to you, but your husband has died in suspicious circumstances. The law dictates that I ask you certain questions."

Blinne raised her chin defiantly. "People are saying that he was taken by a Banshee."

Fidelma regarded her thoughtfully. "You sound as if you give that story no credence?"

"I have heard no wailing messengers of death. Ernán was killed, but not by a ghostly visitation."

"Yet, as I understand it, the wailing on three separate nights thrice awakened your own sister, who dwells with you. This wailing was heard by one of your neighbours."

"As I said, I did not hear it, nor was I awakened. If wailing there was, it was that of a wolf. He was killed by a wolf, that is obvious."

Fidelma regarded her thoughtfully, then she said: "If it was obvious, then there would be no need for this inquiry. Tell me about Ernán. He was a farmer, handsome, and I am told he was well liked. Is that true?"

"True enough."

"He had no enemies?"

Blinne shook her head but responded too quickly, so Fidelma thought. "Are you sure about that?" she pressed.

"If you are trying to tell me that you suspect he was murdered, then I—"

"I am not trying, Blinne," interrupted Fidelma firmly. "I tell you facts. A wolf did not create the wound that caused his death. Now, are you saying that he had no enemies that you know of? Think carefully, think hard, before you reply."

Blinne's face had become a tight mask. "He had no enemies," she said firmly.

Instinctively, Fidelma knew that she was lying. "Did you love your husband?" she asked abruptly.

A red flush spread swiftly over the other woman's features.

"I loved him very much!" came the emphatic response.

"You had no problems between you? Nothing Ernán said that might have led you to think that he nurtured some problem and tried to hide it from you?"

Blinne was frowning suspiciously. "It is the truth I tell you when I say that there were no problems between us and that I loved him very much. Are you accusing me of . . . of murdering my own husband?" Her voice rose sharply, vehemently.

Fidelma smiled disarmingly. "Calm yourself. I am required to ask certain questions and must do so. It is facts that I am after, not accusations."

Blinne's mouth formed a thin line and she still stared belliger-

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ently at Fidelma.

"So," Fidelma continued after a moment or two of silence, "you are telling me that he had no problems, no enemies, that your relationship was good."

"I have said as much."

"Tell me what happened on the night he died."

Blinne shrugged. "We went to bed as usual. When I awoke it was dawn and I heard Bláth screaming outside the house. I think that was what actually awoke me. I rushed out and found Bláth crouching on the threshold with Ernán's body. I cannot remember much after that. Bláth went for Brother Abán, who is also the apothecary in the community. I know he came but could do nothing. It is all a blur."

"Very well. Let me take you back to the time you went to bed. You say, 'We went to bed'? Both of you at the same time?"

"Of course."

"So, as far as you know, you both went to bed and fell asleep together?"

"I have said so."

"You were not disturbed by Ernán getting up either in the night or at dawn?"

"I must have been very tired, for I remember that I had been feeling sleepy after the evening meal and was almost asleep by the time I reached the bed. I think we have been working hard on the farm in recent days, as I have been feeling increasingly tired."

"You heard no disturbances during the night nor during the previous nights?"

"None."

Fidelma paused thoughtfully. "How was your sleep last night?"

Blinne was scornful. "How do you think? My husband had been killed yesterday. Do you think I slept at all last night?"

"I can understand that," agreed Fidelma. "Perhaps you should have had Brother Abán mix you a sleeping draught."

Blinne sniffed. "If there was need for that, I would not have needed bother him. My sister and I were raised knowing how to mix our own herbal remedies."

"Of course. How do you feel now?—physically, I mean."

"As can be expected. I am not feeling well. I feel nauseous and have a headache."

Fidelma smiled softly and rose. "Then I have taxed you too long."

Blinne followed her example.

"Where would I find your sister, Bláth?"

"I think she went to see Glass the miller."

"Good, for I have need to see him as well."

Blinne stood frowning at the door. "You have been told that Glass is claiming he heard this wailing in the night?"

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"I have been told."

Blinne extended her front teeth over her lower lip for a moment, pressing down hard. "I did not hear any noises in the night. But . . ."

Fidelma waited. Then she prompted: "But . . . ?"

"Could it be true? Bláth said . . . people believe . . . I . . . I don't know what to believe. Many people believe in the Banshee."

Fidelma reached out a hand and laid it on the young woman's arm. "If the wailing woman of the hills exists, it is said her task is to be the harbinger of death, lamenting the passing of a soul from this world to the Otherworld. The belief is that the Banshee merely warns; she is never the instrument of death. Whether you believe that is your own affair. Personally, I believe that the Banshee, indeed, all the ghostly visitations that I have encountered, are merely visible manifestations of our own fears, fears whose images we cannot contain within the boundaries of our dreams."

"And yet—"

"I tell you this, Blinne," Fidelma interrupted in a cold voice. "Your husband was killed neither by a Banshee nor by animal agency. . . . A human hand killed him. Before this day is out, the culprit will stand before me."

Brother Abán had directed her along the path towards Glass's mill. The path ran alongside a small stream that twisted itself down to feed the broad river, the Siúr. As she followed the path through a copse of birch trees she heard a strong masculine voice. It was raised in a recitation.

"No pleasure
that deed I did, tormenting her,
tormenting her I treasure . . ."

Fidelma came upon a young man sitting on a rock by the stream. He heard the snap of a twig beneath her feet and swung his face round, flushing crimson as if he had been caught in a guilty deed.

"Greetings, Tadhg," Fidelma said, recognising him.

He frowned; the crimson on his cheeks deepened. "You know me?"

Fidelma did not answer, for that much was obvious. "I am Sister—"

"Fidelma," broke in the young man. "News of your arrival has spread. We are a small community."

"Of course. How well did you know Ernán?" she went on without further preamble.

The young man hesitated. "I knew him," he said defensively.

"That's not what I asked. I said, how well? I already presume that everyone in this community knows each other."

Tadhg shrugged indifferently. "We grew up together until I went

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to the bardic school, which has now been displaced by the monastery founded by Finnan the Leper."

"The place called Finnan's Height? I knew of the old school there. When did you return here?"

"About a year ago."

"And presumably you renewed your friendship with Ernán then?"

"I did not say that I was his friend, only that we grew up together, as most people here of my age did."

"Does that mean that you did not like him?" Fidelma asked.

"One does not have to like everyone one knows or grows up with."

"There is truth in that. Why didn't you like him?"

The young man grimaced. "He was arrogant and thought himself superior to . . . to . . . "

"A poet?" supplied Fidelma.

Tadhg looked at her and then lowered his eyes as if in agreement.

"He was a farmer and thought strength and looks were everything. He called me a weak parasite fit for nothing, not even to clean his pigsty. Most people knew how arrogant he was."

"Yet I am told that Ernán was well liked and had no enemies in the world."

"Then you were told wrong."

"I was told by Blinne."

"Blinne?" The young man's head jerked up and again came an uncontrollable rush of blood to his cheeks.

Fidelma made an intuitive leap forward.

"You like Blinne very much, don't you?"

A slightly sullen expression now moulded the young poet's features.

"Did she tell you that? Well, we grew up together, too."

"Nothing more than an old friendship?"

"What are you saying?"

"Saying? I am asking a question. If you disliked Ernán so much, you must surely not have approved of Blinne being married to him."

"You would soon find that out from anyone in the community," admitted Tadhg sullenly. "I do not deny it. Poor Blinne. She did not have the courage to leave him. He dominated her."

"Are you saying that she did not love him?"

"How could she? He was a brute."

"If she disliked the marriage, there are nine reasons in law why she could have divorced him and more why she could have separated from him."

"I tell you that she did not have the courage. He was a powerful,

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controlling man and it is poetic justice that he was taken by the Banshee, whether you call it Banshee or wolf. That he was a beast and the stronger beast of the night attacked him and tore out his throat was poetic justice."

The young man finished his speech with defiance.

"Poetic?" Fidelma gazed thoughtfully at him. "Where were you the night before last? Where were you when Ernán was killed?"

"In my house. Asleep."

"Where is your house?"

"Up on that hillside." He raised an arm to gesture in the direction.

"Was anyone with you?"

The young man looked outraged. "Of course not!"

"A pity," Fidelma said softly.

"What do you mean?" Tadhg blinked, disconcerted.

"Just that I would like to eliminate you from the vicinity of Ernán's farmstead. He was murdered, his throat cut, and you have just given me a very good reason why you might be suspected of it."

Now Tadhg's face was suddenly drained of blood. "I was told that he had his throat ripped out," he said quietly. "I presumed that it was by a wolf, although many superstitious people are talking about the Banshee."

"Who told you that this was how he died?"

"It is common talk. You say that he was murdered? How can you be so sure?"

Fidelma did not bother to answer.

"Well, I did not do it. I was in my bed, asleep."

"If that is the truth, then you have presented me with another suspect," she said reflectively. "Blinne."

Tadhg swallowed rapidly. "She would never . . . that is not possible. She had not enough courage to divorce Ernán. She was too gentle to strike him down."

"Human beings react in peculiar ways. If not Blinne, nor you, then who else had cause to hate Ernán—a man who was supposed to have no enemies?"

Tadhg raised his hands in a helpless, negative gesture.

"I will want to see you again later, Tadhg."

Fidelma turned and resumed her progress along the path, her brow furrowed in thought.

Bláth had already left Glass's mill when Fidelma reached there.

The miller was a genial, round-faced man of middle age with twinkling gray-blue eyes, which might well have been the reason for his name, which indicated such a colouring. He was a stocky man, clad in a leather apron and open shirt, his muscles bulging

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as he heaved a sack of flour onto a cart.

"A bad thing, Sister, a bad thing," he said when Fidelma introduced herself.

"You were a close neighbour of Ernán, I believe."

The miller turned and pointed. From where they stood the ground began to descend slightly towards the broad river across some fields to where an elm grove stood. "That is Ernán's farmhouse, the building among those trees. We are scarcely ten minutes' walk away from each other."

"And were you a friend of his?"

"I saw young Ernán grow to manhood. I was a friend of his father and mother. They were killed when Crundmáel of Laighin came raiding along the Siúr in his battle boats in search of booty. Only Ernán survived out of his entire family and so he took over the farm and continued to make it prosperous. Blinne, his wife, is my niece." He grinned briefly. "So is Bláth, of course."

"And Ernán was well liked?"

"Not an enemy in the world," Glass replied immediately.

"He and Blinne were happy?"

"Never happier."

"And Bláth lived with them?"

"She could have come here to live, but Blinne and Bláth were always close. There is only a year between them and they are almost like twins. Blinne wanted her sister to be with her and Ernán did not mind, for she helped with the farm work. But why do you ask me these questions?"

Fidelma did not answer. "Tell me about the Banshee," she said.

Glass smiled briefly. "I heard the sound only too well."

"When did you first hear it?"

"I would not want to hear that sound more than once."

Fidelma frowned. "You heard it only once?"

"Yesterday morning about dawn."

"Not before the morning Ernán was found dead?"

"No. Only that one morning. That was enough. It wailed like a soul in torment."

"What did you do?"

"Do? Nothing at all."

"You weren't curious?"

"Such curiosity about the Banshee can endanger your immortal soul," replied Glass solemnly.

"When did you realise that Ernán was dead?"

"When Brother Abán came to tell me and asked me if I had heard anything in the night."

"And you were able to tell him that you had?"

"Of course."

"But only yesterday morning?"

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Glass nodded.

"As a matter of interest, if Ernán was the only survivor of his family, I presume that his farm passes to Blinne?"

"Blinne is his heir in all things," agreed Glass. His eyes suddenly flickered beyond her shoulder in the direction of what had been Ernán's farmstead. Fidelma turned and saw a figure that she initially thought was Blinne making her way up the hill. Then she realised it was a young woman who looked fairly similar.

"Bláth?"

Glass nodded.

"Then I shall go down to meet her, as I need to ask her some questions."

Halfway down the path were some large stones which made a natural seat. Fidelma reached them at the same time as Bláth and greeted her.

"I was coming back to my uncle's mill, for Blinne told me that you had gone there in search of me. You are the *dálaigh* from Cashel, aren't you?"

"I am. There are a few questions that I must ask. You see, Bláth, I am not satisfied about the circumstances of your brother-in-law's death."

Bláth, who was a younger version of the attractive Blinne, pouted. "There is no satisfaction to be had in any death, but a death that is encompassed by supernatural elements is beyond comprehension."

"Are you sure we speak of supernatural elements?"

Bláth looked surprised. "What else?"

"That is what I wish to determine. I am told that you heard the wailing of the Banshee for three nights?"

"That is so."

"You awoke each night and investigated?"

"Investigated?" The girl laughed sharply. "I know the old customs and turned over and buried my head under the pillow to escape the wailing sound."

"It was loud?"

"It was fearful."

"Yet it did not wake your sister or her husband?"

"It was supernatural. Perhaps only certain people could hear it? Glass, my uncle, heard it."

"But only once."

"Once is enough."

"Very well. Were your sister and Ernán happy?"

Fidelma saw the shadow pass across Bláth's face.

"Why, yes."

There was hesitation enough and Fidelma sniffed in annoyance. "I think that you are not being truthful. They were unhappy,

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weren't they?"

Bláth pressed her lips together and seemed about to deny it. Then she nodded. "Blinne was trying to make the best of things. She was always like that. I would have divorced Ernán, but she was not like that."

"Everyone says that she and Ernan were much in love and happy."

"It was the image they presented to the village." She shrugged. "But what has this to do with the death of Ernán? The Banshee took him."

Fidelma smiled thinly. "Do you really believe that?"

"I heard—"

"Are you trying to protect Blinne?" Fidelma snapped.

Bláth flushed.

"Tell me about Tadhg," Fidelma prompted, again sharply, so that the girl would not have time to collect her thoughts.

"You know . . . ?" Bláth began and then snapped her mouth shut.

"Did this unhappiness begin when Tadhg returned to the village?"

Bláth hung her head. "I believe that they were meeting regularly in the woods."

"I think that you believe a little more than that," Fidelma said dryly. "You think that Tadhg and Blinne plotted to kill Ernán."

"No!" Bláth's face was crimson. "There was no reason. If things became so unbearable, Blinne could have sought a divorce."

"True enough, but there was the farmstead. If Blinne divorced Ernán, she would lose it."

Bláth sniffed. "You know the laws of inheritance as well as I do. Land cannot pass to a female heir if there are male heirs."

"But in Ernán's case, there were no male heirs. The land, the farmstead, would go to the *banchomarba,* the female heir."

Bláth suddenly gave a deep sigh of resignation. "I suspected something like this might happen," she confessed dolefully.

"And you invented the story of the Banshee to throw people off the scent?" queried Fidelma.

Bláth nodded. "I love my sister."

"Why not claim an attack by a wolf? That would be more feasible."

"Anyone would realise the wound in Ernán's throat was not the bite of a wolf. Questions would be asked of Blinne and . . . "

"Questions are now being asked."

"But only by you. Brother Abán was satisfied and people here would not question the old ways."

"The old ways." Fidelma echoed the words thoughtfully.

The girl looked nervously at Fidelma.

"I suppose that you intend to have Blinne and Tadhg arrested?"

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"Tonight is the funeral of Ernán. We will see after that."

"You have some doubts still?"

Fidelma smiled sadly. "We will see," she said. "I would like a word alone with your sister."

Bláth nodded towards the farmstead. "I forgot something at my uncle's mill. You'll find Blinne at the farmhouse."

The girl left Fidelma and continued up the path to the mill while Fidelma went on to the farmhouse. As she approached, she heard Blinne's voice raised in agitation.

"It's not true, I tell you. Why do you bother me so?"

Fidelma halted at the corner of a building. In the farmyard she saw Tadhg confronting the girl. Blinne looked distracted.

"The *dálaigh* already suspects," Tadhg was saying.

"There is nothing to suspect."

"It is obvious that Ernán was murdered, killed by a human hand. Obvious that Bláth was covering up with some story about a Banshee. It did not fool me, nor will it fool this woman. I know you hated Ernán. I know it is me that you really loved. But surely there was no need to kill him? We could have eloped and you could have divorced him."

Blinne was shaking her head in bewilderment. "I don't know what you are saying. How can you say this . . . ?"

"I know. Do not try to fool me. I know how you felt. The important thing is to flee from this place before the *dálaigh* can find the evidence. I can forgive you because I have loved you since you were a child. Come, let us take the horses and go now. We can let Bláth know where we have gone later. She can send us some money afterwards. I am sure the *dálaigh* suspects and will be here soon enough."

With a thin smile, Fidelma stepped from behind the building. "Sooner than you think, Tadhg," she said.

The young man wheeled round and his hand went to the knife at his belt.

"Don't make it worse for yourself than it already is," snapped Fidelma.

Tadhg hesitated a fraction and let his hand drop, his shoulders slumping in resignation.

Blinne was gazing at them in bewilderment. "I don't understand this."

Fidelma glanced at her sadly and then at Tadhg. "Perhaps we can illuminate the situation?"

Blinne's eyes suddenly widened. "Tadhg claims that he has always loved me. When he came back from Finnan's Height he would waylay and annoy me like a sick dog, mooning after me. I told him that I didn't love him. Is it . . . it cannot be . . . did he . . . did he kill . . . ?"

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Tadhg looked at her in anguish. "You cannot reject me so, Blinne. Don't try to lay the blame for Ernán's death on me. I know you pretended that you did not love me in public, but I had your messages. I know the truth. I told you to elope with me." His voice rose like a wailing child.

Blinne turned to Fidelma. "I have no idea what he is saying. Make him stop. I cannot stand it."

Fidelma was looking at Tadhg. "You say you had messages from Blinne? Written messages?"

He shook his head. "Verbal, but from an unimpeachable source. They were genuine, right enough, and now she denies me and tries to blame me for what has happened. . . ."

Fidelma held up her hand to silence him. "I think I know who gave you those messages," she said.

After the burial of Ernán, Fidelma sat on the opposite side of the fire to Brother Abán in the tiny stone house next to the chapel. They were sipping mulled wine.

"A sad story," sighed Brother Abán. "When you have seen someone born and grow up, it is sad to see them take a human life for no better reason than greed and envy."

"Yet greed and envy are among the great motivations for murder, Brother."

"What made you suspect Bláth?"

"Had she said that she heard this Banshee wail once, it might have been more credible because she had a witness in her uncle who heard the wail. All those with whom I spoke, who had claimed to have heard it, said they heard it once, like Glass did, on the morning of Ernán's killing. The so-called Banshee only wailed once. It was an afterthought of Bláth's once she had killed her brother-in-law."

"You mean that she was the one wailing?"

"I was sure of it when I heard that she had a good voice and, moreover, knew the *caoine,* the keening, the lament for the dead. I have heard the *caoine* and know it would have been only a small step from producing that terrible sound to producing the wail associated with a Banshee."

"But then she claimed she had done so to lay a false trail away from her sister. Why did you not believe that?"

"I had already been alerted that all was not well, for when I asked Blinne about her sleep, I found that she had not even awoken when Ernán rose in the morning. She slept oblivious to the world and woke in a befuddled state. She was nauseous and had a headache. Blinne admitted that both she and Bláth knew all about herbal remedies and could mix a potion to ensure sleep. Bláth had given her sister a strong sleeping draught so that she

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would not wake up. Only on the third night did an opportunity present itself by which she killed Ernán.

"Her intention all along was to lay the blame at her sister's door, but she had to be very careful about it. She had been planning this for some time. She knew that Tadhg was besotted by Blinne. She began to tell Tadhg an invented story about how Blinne and Ernán did not get on. She told Tadhg that Blinne was really in love with him but could not admit it in public. She hoped that Tadhg would tell someone and thus sow the seeds about Blinne's possible motive for murder."

Brother Abán shook his head sadly. "You are describing a devious mind."

"One must have a clever but disturbed mind to set out to paint another as guilty for one's own acts. Bláth had both."

"But what I do not understand is why—why did she do this?"

"The oldest motives in the world—as we have said—greed and envy."

"How so?"

"She knew that Ernán had no male heirs and so on his death his land, under the law of the *banchomarba,* would go to Blinne. And Bláth stood as Blinne's *banchomarba.* Once Blinne was convicted of her husband's death, she would lose that right and so the farm and land would come to Bláth, making her a rich woman."

Fidelma put down her empty glass and rose.

"The moon is up. I shall use its light to return to Cashel."

"You will not stay until dawn? Night is fraught with dangers."

"Only of our own making. Night is when things come alive; it is the mother of counsels. My mentor, Brehon Morann, says that the dead of night is when wisdom ascends with the stars to the zenith of thought and all things are seen. Night is the quiet time for contemplation."

They stood on the threshold of Brother Abán's house. Fidelma's horse had been brought to the door. Just as Fidelma was about to mount, a strange, eerie wailing sound echoed out of the valley. It rose, shrill and clear against the night sky, rose and ended abruptly, rose again and this time died away. It was like the *caoine.*

Brother Abán crossed himself. "The Banshee!" he whispered.

Fidelma smiled. "To each their own interpretation. I hear only the lonely cry of a wolf searching for a mate. Yet I will concede that for each act there is a consequence. Bláth conjured the Banshee to cover her crime and perhaps the Banshee is having the last word."

She mounted her horse, raised her hand in salute, and turned along the moonlit road towards Cashel. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

FIND IT

by Mary Freeman

The huge male Rott slammed against the front door. Miami took a step back, eyes widening as the dog hit the door again, hard enough so that it shook in the frame. White teeth raked the glass pane, smearing it with blood and drool as the dog dropped to the ground again.

"King?" She swallowed. "What the hell is going on?"

"I got to get in there." Deputy McKenzie gave her a sideways look, backed to the edge of the rickety porch. "You got any ideas?"

Ideas? No. Miami hunched her shoulders, wishing the cicadas at least would sing and fill the empty silence of this strange and awful night. No, she hadn't had an idea since Mike McKenzie's phone call had jolted her out of sleep and into this waking nightmare. "Go get into your car," she said.

"What are you gonna do?" He didn't move.

"Look, he doesn't know you."

"Don't look like he knows anybody right now," the deputy drawled. He gave her another troubled look. "Maybe he knows about Jeff."

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Miami shook her head. Twenty years of dog training had taught her a lot of things, and there was no way that King knew that his beloved owner lay dead—murdered—ten miles from here.

Dead. Jeff. "Get in your car." Without waiting for his reply, she strode across the warped boards of the porch. Heard the creak of the stairs as Mike retreated to his car. Heard, after the solid thunk of the patrol-car door closing, the click of a hammer being pulled back. "Don't you shoot him, Mike," she said without turning around. Shit, she had pulled him out of Katy, her first litter as a two-year-old, the big male coming breech. She had rubbed him hard because he wasn't breathing, had puffed her breath into his tiny wet muzzle. "King, what's the matter with you, you idiot?" She grasped the door handle, pretending that her palm wasn't slick with sweat, winced as 120 pounds of hard-muscled Rottweiler hit the door again, roaring challenge through the quivering panel. "Get down, you big fool." She turned the handle, body as relaxed as any night she dropped by, ready to drink a beer and talk about her day, Jeff's day, the dogs, his latest Search and Rescue case. Body relaxed, heart pounding. "King, what is the matter?"

The door barely cracked and he charged through, slamming her and the door aside as if they were both made of cardboard. "Mike, *don't shoot!*" She switched on the outdoor flood light.

The big dog circled the yard, nose down. Foam flecked his shoulders, white in the moonlight. "King! King, come here! King!"

He circled again, his flat-out charge slowed now to a tracking lope, to a trot, to a slow shamble, his head rising slowly, dark eyes glinting in the wan light as he looked at her. Defeat curved every line in his body and he slunk to her, as if she'd caught him peeing on the floor.

"Oh, baby." She caught his jowls in both hands, pulling his head up, tears burning at the back of her throat. "Oh, sweetheart, you really do know, don't you?" But he wasn't looking at her, was staring at Deputy McKenzie as he gingerly opened the door of the patrol car, hair bristling on his shoulders, growl rumbling deep in

"I train tracking dogs—Rottweilers—so believe me, the tracking details in this story are drawn from painful experience," writes Oregon author Mary Freeman (a.k.a. Mary Rosenblum). "But Obadiah [her real-life dog] is a much more meticulous and precise tracker than the hard-charging King of this story!" The multi-talented Ms. Freeman also writes science fiction and teaches creative writing. ✝

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his chest. "Just stay put a minute, will you?" Said irritably, because it was the middle of the night and Jeff was dead and King knew it, never mind that he couldn't. "Let me put him in the run."

The dog didn't want to go. She had to take him by the collar and nearly drag him into the chain-link run that Jeff used so rarely for King. As soon as she latched the door, he began to bark, a deep-throated, demanding bark that said "Let me out" as clearly as if he'd spoken English. Head down, Miami trudged over to where McKenzie was gingerly climbing out of the patrol car. "What the hell happened?" she asked wearily. At least he'd put the damn gun away.

"Amanda Gilroy took the cutoff over to . . . ah . . . return a spade to Bart Jones." The deputy cleared his throat.

Amanda was seeing Bart nights, while her husband worked Security for the Wildwood Mine. Everyone in Butler Park knew it.

"On her way there, she spotted Jeff's pickup off the road, down in the ditch. She didn't realize anything was wrong at first, figured he was out with the dog, looking for someone, maybe a kid or some fool hiker, since it's the weekend." He was hurrying, his words stumbling over each other. "I guess she was kind of . . . ah . . . late coming back and it was still there. So she went over to see if something was wrong."

Went over to see if Jeff was in there with someone, Miami thought sourly. If Amanda wasn't the subject of gossip, she was spreading it.

"And she found Jeff slumped over the wheel." McKenzie looked past her, up at the starry sky. "His head was pretty bloody, so she used her cell to call nine-one-one." He still wasn't looking at her. "Paramedics . . . did their best. Head injury. Somebody hit him. I guess he was on his way in to the hospital before he passed out."

"Who would kill him?" She'd meant the words to come out flat and hard, but they wavered instead. As if King had heard that waver, he squatted on his broad haunches, pointed his nose at the icy stars, and howled a low, deep, heart-rending note.

"I don't know." McKenzie turned to stare at the howling dog. "I plan to find out."

She didn't get any sleep that night. King refused to settle down. He stood at the door, scratching to go out, and when Miami didn't open it, he barked. Katy glared at them both in disgust and stalked off to curl up on Miami's rumpled bed. Miami made herself a pot of tea and settled down on the battered couch in front of the cold wood stove, finally coaxing the reluctant King to join her.

She wondered sometimes how many people in Butler Park thought they were lovers, she and Jeff, in spite of the twenty years that separated them. They weren't. That had never been part of

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their friendship. He had rented her this house when she had come back here looking for someplace cheap where she could keep her dogs, starting over from bad choices and a bad marriage. Her transmission had died on the side of the narrow county road that ran through the county woods. She had a very pregnant Katy in the cab, no money, and no prospects. Running home like a lost dog, even though there was no longer any home to run to.

He had pulled over in his muddy Toyota pickup. "Your girl looks like she's going to whelp any time," he had told her. "I just lost my dog, so I've got plenty of room." He had loaded them both into the truck and taken them home to his small neat cottage where he had fed them both and given them the single bed. Katy had gone into labor that night and he had crouched beside Miami with towels while she worked the huge breech puppy free and delivered the other three puppies. Later, he had offered to rent her this house, which had just been vacated by a former tenant, and had loaned her enough money to get her truck fixed.

That was Jeff, she had discovered. A quiet listener, a gentle loner, living on a trust fund settled on him after he found the son of a wealthy family. He was one to offer a hand before you had to ask for help and was never too busy to listen and to hear what you were telling him, no matter how trivial it was. Landlord first, he had become a friend. He had worked in Search and Rescue since he was a teenager but had not moved to Butler Park until sometime after she had left. They were both outsiders in this small dying Pennsylvania mine town, never mind that she had been born here and spent her first sixteen years here.

King whined, as if divining the path of her thoughts. "We'll both miss him," she said. Her voice broke as she buried her face against his shoulder, and the first tears finally stung her eyes. "Everyone liked him. How could anyone want to hurt him?" she whispered into King's thick neck. He licked her face and whined softly.

When Mike showed up in his patrol car, she was blearily splitting kindling, trying not to cut her fingers off, and not caring much. He wanted her to come into town to identify the body. "Why me?" she asked, stabbed by a moment of intense terror. "Get someone else."

"You're listed as the person to notify in an emergency. In fact, you're listed as next of kin." Mike sounded just as surly as she felt. "Don't ask me why. Do you know anything about his family?"

"He was adopted. That's all I know." There was no out. Mike's solid immobility told her so. Wearily, she locked the reluctant King into a run and climbed into the patrol car, leaving Katy as regal sentry on the front porch. "Jeff never talked about his family—real or adopted. At all." His past was the only closed subject between them, and five years of close friendship hadn't changed that. She

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stared out at the late-summer woods as Mike manhandled the patrol car along the narrow county road as it wound around the hills. The black birch and maples were just beginning to show a hint of fall color. Dark clusters of wild grapes stood out beneath a tangle of yellowing leaves as they dropped down into the narrow valley where Butler Park hugged the banks, the dingy brick buildings shabby and unkempt in the wake of the failing mines, stained by decades of coal smoke.

They passed the two-story brick box of the high school, with its concrete scroll above the door with Butler Park High School engraved in fake Germanic script on it. The town looked strange, as if she had just happened by here on her way to somewhere else. But it had always had an edge of unfamiliarity. Miami sometimes thought her dreamy, distant mother had cursed her when she had given her the name of a city that had symbolized all the unattainable to her—exotic flowers, beautiful people, and warm ocean. That name had set her apart from the dark-haired miners' children with their hand-me-down clothes, lurking shadows at the backs of their eyes, and Monday-morning bruises.

Miami felt herself shutting down as they took the elevator to the basement of the little hospital and walked along the dim corridor with its pale green walls and flickering fluorescent lights. Mike made a move as if to touch her arm in the chill of the corridor, but he didn't, merely held the double doors open for her. The man in white in the cold formaldehyde-smelling room at the end pulled out the big drawer that somehow didn't look big enough to hold a human body. Miami swallowed, glad that she hadn't eaten breakfast. She'd seen death before, but this was something other than the moment of dying. Jeff's body, white and way too still, looked like something carved from wax or plastic. A mannequin set here as a horrible practical joke. Not Jeff, she thought. It's not him.

She nodded, turned her back on the white plastic doll that had once been a man with a slow grin, a wry sense of humor, and the wisdom of one who'd spent his life working with dogs.

"You okay?" Mike did touch her this time, but she shook him off.

"I just need to get out of here." She fixed her eyes on the gray elevator doors. "You got any leads yet?"

"No." Mike bit off the word. He stood aside to let two young orderlies in green out of the elevator, and then followed her inside. "No leads. Nothing. We don't know where it happened, where he was. Nobody remembers seeing him yesterday evening at all, and that's the main road from Butler Park over to Allison. He could have gotten onto it from any of a dozen little back roads. You got hiking trails all over the hills there, too, back on the old mining land. Whoever did it could have cut cross-country and be miles from here.

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"The medical examiner says a subdural hematoma killed him. He says that kind of injury is tricky—the victim might black out right away or walk around for a couple of hours before he collapsed. No way to tell—"

"Shut up, Mike." The elevator doors opened and Miami fled, out through the lobby full of worried friends and relatives, out into the false warmth of late-September Indian summer. At the edge of the parking lot she spun around so fast that she nearly collided with Mike. "Why was King home? Jeff never went anywhere without King."

"Well, this time he decided to." Mike shrugged.

He didn't get it. She shook her head. Jeff *didn't* leave King at home. If King couldn't come along, Jeff didn't go. Something was wrong here.

"You ready to head back?"

"So what have you found out?" Miami met his gray eyes. "What are you doing to find the creep who killed him?"

"We're . . . looking for the site of the attack." Mike looked away.

Angry. The realization seeped past the wall of her grief. He was angry. Why?

"We're checking all the side roads between the house and where the truck went off the road. Asking if anyone saw him."

Those little roads wound up into the hills that had once been mine land and were now a brushy wasteland slowly returning to the oak, ash, and hemlock climax forest of Western Pennsylvania. Public land, now. Anyone could go back there. The families who struggled along in the sagging frame houses tucked back into clearings cluttered with dead cars and busted washing machines—marginal survivors of the mine's death—wouldn't be too inclined to say much to a deputy in a patrol car.

"Why didn't you tell me? We should have brought King," Miami said quickly. "We'll take him along, and if Jeff set foot on the ground any time in the past week, he's going to let us know. Jeez, Mike, he's a Search and Rescue dog. And he's Jeff's dog."

"No." Mike wouldn't look at her. "Sheriff Bauer's orders. He said it's too late for a search dog . . . been too much time."

Miami gaped at him. "He said *what?*"

"I know, I know." Mike raised a hand. "You know how he feels about dogs."

"No, I know how he feels about Jeff and King. And me, for that matter." The words nearly choked her. "He doesn't want to share TV coverage with anyone else. Mike, this is a *murder.* The man is stupid, but I didn't know he was that—"

"Cool it, Miami." Mike flushed. "You're right, but there's nothing I can do about it, okay? Don't come out and make trouble. Al's just looking for an excuse to put you in jail for a night or two." There

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was a hint of pleading in his tone. "Don't worry. We're turning over every stone up there."

If she said anything, anything at all, she was going to blow her friendship with Mike, and he was a nice guy . . . when he wasn't working for his boss. She turned on her heel and stalked across the street to the Super Mart.

"You want a ride or not?" he yelled after her. "Damn it, Miami, can't you ask for help once in a while?"

Startled by his words, she shook her head, shoved through the automatic door into the Super Mart, and grabbed one of the rusty metal carts.

Jeff had named her next of kin. She shoved the cart down the nearest aisle. Who would they call if she . . . Frowning, she stared blankly at the shelves, reached for a can of milk. Her great-aunt Dorsey, in the Home, ninety-three this spring. Her mother had a couple of sisters, but they lived in other states and she hadn't kept track of them. That's it. Her father was an only child, dead the year she was born. She heaved a sack of dog food into the cart.

Can't you ask for help . . . Mike's words haunted her. She shoved the cart against the wall next to the dairy case and stalked past the curious cashier, out into the autumn morning. The Home stood on a natural shelf above town, a mere three blocks up from the store, its windows looking out on the grimy brick spread of Butler Park. Pink chintz curtains fluttered in Aunt Dorsey's window and when she made her way up the stairs, avoiding the creaky elevator, her great-aunt answered before she could have heard her.

"Saw ya comin'." Her snowy head bobbed in a nod of greeting, but her eyes were grave in the pale crepe of her face. "I wondered if you'd come see me."

"You heard." It wasn't a question. Great-aunt Dorsey knew everything, as soon as it happened.

"Yep." The old woman nodded again. "Figured someone'd tell you, now he's dead. Town like this, someone always spills the beans. He kept his word, you know, never did tell anyone. Not even you, I guess." Her face softened. "It was for the best, honey. One of those moments that everybody regrets afterward, but then it's too late. Your dad knew. He never let it get in his way."

Miami stared at her, all her questions, all her protests drying into one unsayable lump in her throat. She shook her head, dumb.

"They were kids, him and your mama. He was just here for the summer. I could wish you'd stayed away another year. I suspect he'd've picked up and left finally. He was waitin' for you to come back."

"How could you not . . . tell me?" She managed to get the words out in a whisper.

Her great-aunt's face was implacable. "It was one of those

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moments," she repeated. "No reason to spoil good memories." But a hint of sympathy lurked in her pale, dry eyes. "I'm sorry, honey."

Miami spun on her heel and fled, ignoring her aunt's call, clattering down the stairs, thinking that it had been a mistake to come back here, that she should have kept going instead of coming home, found some other hole to crawl into. She didn't even realize that she'd left the building until a sheriff's department car pulled up beside her. "You look like you need a ride," Mike said through the open window. "Miami, get in."

She did, still numb, sat back in the seat, staring through the windshield. "I thought you were out looking for clues." The words came out flat and toneless.

"What happened?" Mike turned onto the main street. "Miami?"

"Nothing." She turned to face him, her neck so stiff that she expected to hear a rusty screech, as if her vertebrae had turned to old iron. "I thought you were out looking for clues."

"The boss has got enough men in the field." Mike's voice was flat. "I'm . . . on patrol." He looked at her sideways, concern in his eyes. "I . . . I've got . . . Jeff's things." He cleared his throat. "I'll give you a ride home."

She merely nodded, not wanting to talk, because if she did, she'd tell him. About Aunt Dorsey, and whys and why nots that she wasn't ready to face, now or maybe ever. Mike seemed willing to honor her silence as they traversed the winding road, past the place where Jeff had died, slumped over the wheel of his truck.

When they pulled up in front of the house, she got out and went to the run where King lay flat in front of the wooden doghouse, head on his forepaws, every line of his body drooping. She was aware of Mike behind her as she lifted the latch on the door. King's head had come up and his nose worked.

"Here," Mike was saying behind her. "I brought—"

King launched from the ground, his attack silent and so unexpected that Miami had no time to block him or even to yell a *No!* The gate slammed into her, knocking her sideways, stumbling, and then King was on top of Mike, front feet hitting his chest, all the dense power of a breed that had been created to work with cattle and make them move slamming him backward, wad of clothes spilling, his shout seeming to hang behind him in the golden afternoon light.

"King, no!" She fell hard on her hip, felt muscle and bone shift, scrambled because King wasn't her dog and he wasn't going to listen to her no, and . . . Feet miraculously under her, she flung herself onto the dog. He was on Mike's chest, snarling, and a tiny rational part of her mind wailed because he had to have teeth in Mike and that would be his death. . . . "King, *no!*" Arms wrapped around his thick muscular neck, she pulled, knowing that she

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couldn't get him off Mike, despair clawing at her.

She tumbled onto her butt as he bounded backward, felt the jolt of hard-packed earth slam up through her spine to jolt her teeth together. Growling, King gave her an apologetic look.

He had backed off.

"Goddamn crazy dogs." Mike scrambled to his feet, face white, lips greenish. "Damn dog. I don't know why people . . . " He bit the words off, his lips working. Took a deep breath. "Can't trust a Rott."

He wasn't bleeding. She stared at him, her brain numb. Realized slowly, from the crease in his eyes, that he was expecting a response from her. Expecting her to exonerate King. "I . . . don't have a clue, Mike." Her voice trembled just a bit. "There's a reason. I don't know . . . what it is."

"Me neither." He gave King a wary look. "I guess you're fine. No one's gonna mess with you, are they?" He headed for the car, watching King from the corner of his eyes. "You guys and your macho dogs."

He was okay. "That's not it." But her conviction wafted away on the breeze, not touching him.

He flung himself onto the seat of the cruiser and slammed the door. "I'll let you know what we find out." He was cranking the ignition as he spoke, gunned the car in reverse down the driveway.

"King, you ass," she said, but her words were weak and King's ears didn't even twitch. He was busy tearing Jeff's clothes to shreds, methodically, front feet planted on the legs of the jeans, ripping denim from felled seams as if it were gauze and not strong fabric.

"Mike, he wasn't attacking you," she said softly, but he was long gone and probably wouldn't believe her anyway. Who would? She watched King for a moment, then went over and reached for a piece of the tattered jeans. King eyed her, but was busy tearing one leg into shreds the size of cocktail napkins. "What's going on?"

King ignored her.

Jeff's clothes. She recognized the jeans, with their worn knees and patch at the left pocket where he kept his dog treats. There was a flannel shirt and underwear. King started in on the shirt, and the sharp tearing sound of flannel made her wince.

Grief, she thought, but the bristle of hackles across King's shoulders denied it. Something wanted to make sense here, but she couldn't bring it together. She limped down the driveway to close the main gate, went back to the house to let Katy out. Katy turned in a brief greeting circle in front of her, then trotted over to see what King was up to. He barely looked up from his destruction. She sniffed, and the hackles bristled over her shoulders as well.

Surprise stirred Miami's gut. Katy knew Jeff well.

Hackles?

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Slowly, she walked over to the two dogs. Trust your dog. You learn that, tracking. No matter where you think that track might lie, no matter that you *know* it's not *there,* when that nose jerks around like a fish on a hook, and the dog surges forward, go with 'em. Trust them. They have a sense that we primates can't even imagine. "Who wore those clothes?" she asked softly.

Both dogs raised their heads, blinked dark amber, unreadable eyes at her.

"It wasn't Jeff, was it?"

And why would someone put on Jeff's clothes? And these had come from the . . . body.

From the body.

It wasn't possible. She had seen him, Jeff, dead, waxlike and alien, but Jeff . . .

Trust your dog.

She ran to the house, called Mike's cell phone. It was off. Off! Well, maybe he expected her to call, to rationalize, and he didn't want to listen. She called his home number, got his machine. "It wasn't Jeff," she said breathlessly. "The body. It isn't Jeff. He's out there. I don't care that it's not possible . . . it's true. We're going to go look. Me and the dogs. Starting where the truck was." Because that was the only place she knew where to start.

She grabbed Katy's tracking harness, collared both dogs, and loaded them into her van. They went reluctantly. King gave her a steady and intent stare, panting. She slammed the doors on the crates, opened the gate, and drove on through. The full moon had risen—harvest moon, tracking moon. The dogs wouldn't need it, but she would, scent-blind primate.

She had seen Jeff's body.

Trust your dog.

She pulled off onto the shoulder, parking on the flattened weeds where Jeff's truck had stood. They'd towed it away. It was no longer a crime scene. Numb, head pounding, she opened Katy's crate, let her out, got the tracking harness down from its hook, and braced herself for King's launch. Caught him, struggling with his mass and power, yelling, "Wait, wait!" And he did, miraculously, because he knew the command and because she was Jeff's friend. She buckled the harness over his massive chest, letting out the straps to fit, feeling his quivering heat beneath her nervous fingers. Then she had the tracking line on him. He didn't track on a line. He air-scented the lost, quartering, searching. But he wouldn't wait for her, wouldn't come back to her whistle, like he came to Jeff. Not if Jeff had been here. But he had started on a line and ground scent, and she prayed he'd remember the harness.

He leaped down onto the graveled roadside. "Find it," she yelled. She might have saved her breath.

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He circled at first, casting, nose down, shoulders hunched as he trotted and sorted out the scent picture. How many cops had been here, gawkers, tow-truck drivers? What if he had pulled off the road here, as Mike had guessed? Where did she go from here? King ignored her as she trotted behind, trying to keep the line from snagging beneath the van's tires as he worked. No track. Her heart sank. Jeff hadn't gotten out here. Whatever had happened had happened somewhere else.

Then . . . had it.

She saw that fish-hook jerk as if some invisible fisherman had set a hook in his nose—on track!—barely had time to ready the line as he took off at a fast trot, head down, nose brushing the ground. Katy ran behind him, her nose down, too. Tracking. Like a spear thrown into the dark, like a missile launched, King pierced the night. Forty feet of tracking line burned through her palm. She caught the knot at the end, hung on to it, stumbling forward, nearly jerked off her feet as King . . . went.

It was a nightmare of blindness. He dragged her forward through the dry weeds and clawing dewberry that fringed the road, giving her a moment, as the line snagged on a hawthorn, to tie the line around her waist. The hawthorn spikes clawed her face and she ducked her head as he dragged her down a narrow path, shielding her eyes, feeling the sting of scratches on her cheeks as they emerged into the rough meadow beyond. King dragged her across it, lunging into the harness now, nose down, foam flecks gleaming white on his shoulders. Katy trotted precisely behind him, her nose down, too, her posture intense.

Jeff had come this way.

The track led up the steep slope on the far side of the meadow, through clumps of mountain laurel and sassafras, branches whipping at her, the scent of crushed black birch and churned forest earth in her nostrils, the only sound the *shuush* and crackle of their bodies through the underbrush and the harsh metronome rasp of King's panting breath. Up, up. She stumbled, fell, clawed for purchase as King dragged her, managed to scramble to her feet, only to fall again. She bit back his name, didn't yell at him. On the other end of this mad, blind, crazy rush was . . . Jeff.

She fell again, onto scabby rock now, a low rim of shale erupting from the soil. She scrambled, the dogs scrambled, upward, upward. She slipped near the top, but King dragged her, the line cutting into her ribs, until she got purchase and made it over the lip. She was staggering now, her ribcage raw from the line, which had slipped beneath her shirt, arms up to shield her face, lurching on, staggering forward with King's every lunge against the line.

He was roaring now, a guttural howl that emerged with each breath. She heard it, numb, entirely focused on staying on her feet.

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The line went slack.

She fell forward, sprawling facedown into a patch of wintergreen, thought dreamily of wintergreen LifeSavers. Then she heaved herself to her hands and knees, squinting into the shadows, to where King pawed and moaned. Katy danced around him, whining, dodging as he whirled to snarl at her.

The moon's pale light showed Jeff, sprawled facedown in the leaves, his limbs splayed as if he had been crawling when he gave out. King shoved his broad muzzle beneath Jeff's face and heaved, the slap of his tongue audible in the midnight hush.

Jeff's left hand twitched, fingers curling slightly, pale in the wash of moonlight.

Alive! He was alive! Galvanized, Miami struggled to her feet, yelling at King, laughing, crying, aware of Katy, leaping and concerned beside her. "Get off!" Her yell startled both dogs back onto their haunches and miraculously . . . miraculously . . . King sat. "Wait," she panted, with all the force she could manage. "Just *wait.*"

They waited, both of them, ebony statues in the moonlight, silver strings of drool trailing from King's jaws. "Jeff," she whispered, her face close to his. Breath? Please, God! He moaned, just a whisper of sound, but it was there. He was alive.

For now. The dark stain on his white T-shirt began to register on her vision. Black in the moonlight—no not black, just dark. Blood. He had been shot, stabbed, she couldn't tell. She was crying, sobbing, she hadn't realized it until suddenly two dogs were licking her face and Katy was whining, turning tight circles in distress.

Go back, she thought. Drive back and call 911. Get an ambulance out here, stretcher. A part of her mind howled like the dogs . . . no. Don't leave him alone. Not again. She ignored it, even as she touched his face, felt the coolness of his flesh, realized that her skin was tight with goose bumps, that it was cold. Frost tonight. Indian summer was coming to an end.

"Jeff." Her lips brushed his ear, and its chill tightened her stomach. "I'm going to go get help. King's here."

"Wait."

It was a breath of sound, barely a word. But she waited, cradling his head against her shoulder, willing her body heat to warm him.

"I . . . never . . . knew."

She could barely make out the syllables.

"He didn't believe me . . . that I didn't know. I . . . tried to help him . . . clothes . . . he wanted more money. I didn't *know.* I kept telling him . . . but . . . he had a gun." He struggled to lift his head. "My fault. You . . . didn't know either. My fault. Miami . . . I should have told you . . ." The words trailed off.

"It's *not!* I know." She held him close, eyes squeezed tight. "I know, Jeff. Okay? I know and it's all right, it really is."

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He didn't answer, and she felt his body relax. Panic spiked through her and she pressed her fingers against his throat, praying for the jugular's pulse. It was there, faint and thready, but there. "Good boy," she whispered hoarsely to King, who leaned over her, pushing her with his hot black mass. "Stay with him." Those words were for her comfort. King didn't need them.

Scrambling to her knees, she fumbled the harness off King and put it on Katy, too loose now, and never mind, wadded up the tracking lead to make a leash. "Let's go," she said, voice hoarse. And if he died while she was gone? Alone?

No. She glanced back at King, who had lain down against Jeff's chest, his broad black head flat on the ground beside his master's face. Not alone. "Let's go," she rasped, and pulled at the line. "Let's go home," she said, forcing her voice to a cheerful pitch. "Home, Katy." Home meant back to the van. Katy gave her a doubtful glance, looked at King, then, head down, started confidently forward. She would bring them back to the van, following their track back.

In time? Miami shut that question down, buried it deep inside her.

It was a lot longer going back. Forever. And then there would be the drive to her house . . . the closest phone . . .

Ahead, she glimpsed light, a flicker barely visible through the young and thick second growth. Light? Hope surged up into her throat, turned her shouts to squeaks. Katy roared a challenge, and she heard a shout from up ahead.

Mike's voice.

He appeared from the trees and Katy bounded up to him, jumping up to plant her feet on his chest, something she never ever did.

"He's alive," Miami sobbed out, struggling for words and breath. "Jeff's alive. Up there. King's with him."

Mike had his cell phone out, was speaking tersely, angrily, and she couldn't hear the words, couldn't hear anything over the roaring in her ears. Miraculously, seemingly moments later, men appeared, paramedics with a stretcher. She led them back and caught King around the neck as he stood to confront them. It took all her strength to hold him as he roared challenge and she felt rather than saw the nervous looks of the paramedics as they worked over Jeff, starting an IV, sliding him onto the rescue stretcher, strapping him down. "Wait, it's okay, wait," she chanted to the snarling King, arms locked around him, knowing that the only reason she held him back was because he *let* her, blessing him, blessing Jeff and his training, soothing him as growls rumbled in his deep chest. She looked at Mike to see if he had his gun out, but he didn't. Not this time. The men picked up the webbed stretcher, started down the slope at a fast pace.

She waited after they left, afraid to let King go. Waited, counting

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slowly to a thousand again and again.

Finally, she let him go and with a single deep-throated bark, he vanished.

Katy whined, nudging her hand hard, worried, bending her lithe, muscular body around her legs, worrying as only a dog can worry. "It's okay." Maybe. Her voice sounded rusty, as if she hadn't spoken for years. "Let's go home."

She didn't need the line. Katy didn't get far ahead, kept looking back at her. The trek back to the van really took forever this time. King was there, circling the trampled pull-out space restlessly, whining, his entire body drooping with defeat. She suspected he'd tracked the ambulance up the road, and had returned when all trace of Jeff had petered out.

"Oh, sweetheart," she breathed, the words catching in her throat. She loaded Katy into her crate. King didn't resist when she went to get him; he went with her, docile, his head down, climbing like an old dog into the crate. Her knee hurt, and when she touched her face, her fingers encountered a crusted tracery of dried blood.

Headlights flared as she slammed the van's rear doors. She blinked, blinded, waiting for the car to pass, but instead it pulled in behind the van, headlights dying.

Mike. He bolted out of the car, halted. "I wanted to make sure you were okay." He hesitated. "I think Jeff's going to be okay. The paramedics thought so, but it's not for the record."

Dizzy, she licked her lips, coppery blood-tang on her tongue. "Oh God, I hope . . ." She leaned against the van because she was *not* going to fall down. No way. "How come you were . . . here?"

Mike took three long strides and was beside her, arm around her. "There was this motel key. On the floor of his truck." He was holding her up. She wanted, with part of her mind, to shake him off and stand up straight on her own. She didn't.

"Why would Jeff have a motel key?" Mike went on, his face shadowed, looking down at her. "And you said he wouldn't leave King home. So I went over there. It was a Lebanon motel. I got a search warrant. Jeff had a brother, Miami. They were twins. I don't know if Jeff even knew about him. But he knew about Jeff. He sure left plenty behind. He had notebooks full of stuff. He'd been stalking Jeff. For years, looks like. He kept a damn *diary,* bless him. He contacted Jeff about three weeks ago. He knew about the Heinz kid who got lost, and how the family set up that trust fund for Jeff, for finding him. This guy . . . Allan Gregor he went by . . . wrote plenty about how he felt about that. I guess he didn't make out too well in life. He got money out of Jeff, some clothes, playing for pity, but he sure hated his brother."

He didn't believe me . . . that I didn't know. A twin. How surreal. "Jeff didn't know," she said.

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My fault. I should have told you.

We hide so much, she thought wearily. For such trivial reasons. "I think he meant to fool us all with the clothes." Not King. Clothes wouldn't fool King. "He got Jeff to leave King home. Then he pulled a gun." Jeff felt so guilty. Partly because of her. Maybe that's why he hadn't told anyone. She closed her eyes.

"My guess is that this guy meant to switch places, collect the money Jeff was getting. Silly," he said. "It wasn't much. But I remember the papers made a big deal about it—like it was millions. I guess 'cause the family is so rich. Jeff managed to hit him with something and it was a lucky hit." Mike touched her cheek lightly. "Let me take you home. It's going to be awhile before Jeff gets out of surgery. They'll call me on my cell. You look like hell, Miami."

Lucky hit, yes. He would have killed King, after Jeff. He would have had to. "Thank you," she said, and her face hurt when she smiled.

"You want me to drive?"

She was going to say no, swallowed the word. "Yes," she said. "I would like you to drive me home. Thanks."

"You're welcome," he said, and he didn't touch her as she limped around the van to climb into the passenger seat.

Everything was a blur, like swimming in deep muddy water. Every so often she would surface, catch a vivid image of herself closing the kennel gate on a drooping and anxious King, filling his water pan from the hose, giving Katy a drink in the house. Mike was always there, in the background. No gun. There was that, at least. Then his cell phone rang, and the fog retreated, leaving her stranded and cold in the front room of the house. The wood stove had long ago gone out and she shivered.

"He's going to be okay." Mike looked at her, putting the phone away as he spoke. "He's out of surgery."

"Let's go."

"Miami, you need to go to bed."

She shook her head, lacking words, which took up too much energy. Amazingly, he didn't argue. Instead he took her arm, which earned him an alert look from Katy but no protest, guided her outside. She put Katy into the run next to King, which earned her a dirty look from Katy, but she didn't want to leave King here all by himself. Then she climbed into the passenger seat.

The road unrolled ahead of them, a ribbon of black asphalt fenced by trees, and thoughts prowled her mind like winter bobcats, wary of the light, never really coming into focus. Mike just drove, he didn't say a word.

Then they were parking, sodium lights yellow overhead. They got out and Miami winced at the twinge of frost in the air. Definitely freezing tonight. She halted, everything surreal in the too-

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bright light of the tall lamps. "Mike?"

He looked at her, as reluctant as King.

"Thank you," she said.

"Sure."

There was a hurt there, a surliness that didn't make sense. She shook her head. Figure it out later. Walked toward the emergency-room entrance.

Mike did the talking. She didn't really listen, just waited, and after a period of time that might have been minutes or hours, they were walking down a corridor that smelt of disinfectant and despair. Mike halted at the door to a room full of dim light. "Want me to wait outside?" he asked.

"No." The question surprised her. But she had no energy to think about it; she went in.

Jeff lay flat on his back in a white bed with rails. Tubes snaked around him, into his arms, out from beneath the sheets.

He didn't look like the corpse in the morgue.

He was alive.

She sat down by the bedside, reached tentatively to take his hand. Plastic tubing from a flat plastic bag full of clear fluid snaked down from a metal stand to disappear beneath adhesive tape on his arm. His eyelids fluttered as she curled her fingers through his. His eyes opened and he looked at her.

"Aunt Dorsey told me," she whispered. And she picked up his hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"Sorry." The word came out a whisper, faint as a dying breath. "I wanted . . . to tell you." Then his eyelids fluttered again and his fingers uncurled, lax in her hands.

Miami looked at him in fear, but Mike's hand was on her shoulder. "It's all right," he said. "Look at the monitors. He's just asleep."

The monitors were nothing but blinking lights that meant nothing to her. She looked up at Mike. "He's my father," she said, and laid his hand gently back on the bed.

Mike didn't say anything, although shadows walked swiftly across his face, then vanished.

"I'm going to stay here for a while," she told him. The dogs would be fine until morning. "I can drive myself home. Thank you," she said, wanting to hug him, not wanting to touch him.

For a moment he stood still. Then he reached out, touched her face gently. When he withdrew his fingers, crystal tears spangled them. "Let me know if you need anything," he said. He started to leave, then hesitated, turned back. "Will you?"

She met his eyes, drew a deep breath. "I will." She breathed out. "I really will."

He left, and she sat down next to the bed to wait until Jeff woke up. ●

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Snored to Death
by Terry Lerdall Fitterer

Emily was weary as she slid beneath the sheet,
for hubby's nightly snoring had excluded her from sleep.
Her eyelids drooped, her nerves were frayed, her brain too tired to think;
the sanity she once possessed was sorely on the brink.

The noise was most explosive, as the bedroom shook and quaked,
his gurgles and his grunting left her tense and wide awake.
She feared she would be deafened by his irritating din;
her temper heightened quickly with her patience wearing thin.

One day as she was weeding in her garden full of greens
she nodded off and found herself facedown among the beans!
When shopping at the supermarket, much to her dismay
she dozed while in the checkout line and hence, forgot to pay!

Her husband was the culprit and should have to pay the price;
her thoughts had turned to vengeance as her heart grew cold as ice.
One morning over breakfast with her body void of pep,
poor Emily decided she must take a drastic step.

She set a plan in motion to eliminate the sound,
most unaware her train of thought was heading murder-bound.
For it was not her nature—she was such a passive soul—
but lack of rest and sleepless nights had taken quite a toll.

She waited till her hubby, George, had fallen fast asleep,
and tippy-toed, avoiding waking up the noisy creep;
then pinched a clothespin on his snout, an orange down his throat,
convinced her little scheme was but the perfect antidote.

He pitched and bolted upright in attempt to catch his breath,
then sputtered, "Have you lost your mind? You're choking me to death!"
Since Emily could find no words to calm her panicked spouse,
she grabbed a quilt for nesting in the basement of the house.

The hard cement was cold as she lay rigid on the floor,
then to her shock came following a most resounding snore
that carried through the floorboards to the ceiling overhead—
there'd be no rest for Emily until she "offed" his head!

And that she did one Friday night as he was sleeping sound;
the case was solved quite quickly when a headless George was found.
From fingerprints she left about, to messy, bloody tracks,
detectives knew his tired wife had given him the axe.

It was a deed that Emily would just as soon forget,
for now she's sleeping undisturbed with nary a regret.
The cell is hard and cold much like the basement in her house,
but quieter without the snores from her beheaded spouse.

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Stately Homes and the Impossible Shot

by Arthur Porges

When Arthur Porges began writing for *EQMM* in the 1950s, pastiches of the work of famous mystery writers were extremely popular, especially with *EQMM*'s founding editor, Fred Dannay, who was even said to enjoy a good takeoff on his own fictional characters, Ellery and Inspector Queen. Mr. Porges's Stately Homes stories show the great detective "Homes" playing a little less than fair with his Watson (or Sun Wat), but employing typical Holmesian ingenuity.

My old friend and—dare I say it in this country that so greatly prizes understatement—hero. Stately Homes (of England), has few, if any, faults; but it's true that when long unchallenged by some puzzle, usually one involving criminality, he tends towards indolence, so when I found him one morning at breakfast actually perusing the *Times* before I could get to it myself, I was surprised and, I must confess, a little annoyed.

"Just what I wanted, Sun Wat," he exclaimed, jabbing a long, slender forefinger against the page, "another crime of the locked-room sort that is particularly to my taste." Then, seeing my look of bewilderment, since I wasn't familiar with that descriptive phrase, he added, "You know—as when somebody is found dead, murdered, presumably, in a room to which no access is possible in the circumstances. Of course, few cases typify that dilemma exactly, but you get my point, I'm sure. Another example might be that of a victim found dead in the center of a large area of loose sand, but not a footprint has been left, although the person was strangled, not killed from a distance."

Now, in my native country, India, we solve our crimes more through psychology and intuition, aided occasionally by the many superstitions that make our lawbreakers easier to outwit. They are more subject to guilt, a fear of offending God, say, than an

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English criminal. That's why, no doubt, Homes's impeccable logic and his deductions from it impress me, and cause me to over-value pure intellect. If so, kismet! I am a Sikh, and the product of my race and religion.

Unaware, of course, of these vagrant thoughts, Homes continued: "This little mystery, so carefully explicated in the *Times*, fits the bill perfectly. Consider, my friend: You have the victim, one William Shelton, seated at his desk in a small office. His back is to a window that is open only ten inches at the bottom. The desk at which he is seated is so close to the window that nobody can approach him from the rear. A shot is fired from somewhere, which presumably goes through the window's opening, since no glass is broken. But from that angle it could only strike him fairly low, about where his neck joins his body; whereas, in fact, the bullet pierces the back of his head, the occiput, as you, a doctor, would call it. How can that be explained?"

I have nothing like the brains of Homes, yet I instantly saw what must be the only answer to his question, one suggested by various comic artists I admire in *Punch*. "Elementary, my dear Homes," I said, a reply that made him wince. "Somebody could have stood in front of the desk with one of those guns having a long barrel curved in a semicircle. He need only reach out, hook the muzzle to the back of Shelton's head, and pull the trigger!"

My friend's eyebrows shot up, and I knew instantly that my case wasn't made, but had at least one fatal flaw.

"Really, Sun Wat," he said, clearly irked. "I expect better from you. You must stop indulging yourself in those absurd *Punch* drawings, meant only as humor, and not even good for that. No bullet ever made can transit a curved, half-a-circle barrel like that. The gun would blow up and kill or badly injure the fool who fired it. Besides, although I fault myself for not mentioning it, nobody went into or out of the room, the *Times* assures us. On the other hand," he said, noting my hangdog expression, "you have nearly stumbled on a most interesting anomaly, which is that no ordinary slug of lead, even copper-coated, did the killing, but rather one of those new shiny steel balls that reduce friction in many of our modern machines. Why was that used, do you think?"

I stared at him wordlessly. How the devil was I expected to know that?

He smiled, as if regretting his terse manner towards me.

"I've no idea myself," he assured me. We must learn more about the victim, whose business was numismatics—the buying and selling of rare coins and medallions. He employed two assistants who sat outside his office, near the door, which is how we know that nobody came or went during the murder. Well, Michael Kean and his band of little ragamuffins will be invaluable in ferreting out all

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the gossip invariably missed by the newspapers."

After that conversation, I was quite unable for several days to elicit anything further from him about the case. Instead, he played, almost constantly, on his violin, frequently smiling at me without saying a word about his reflections.

I found it particularly galling that although he often consulted with his Baker Street Irregulars, as he called the ragged urchins who served him (and were well paid for their work), I found their muttered exchanges impossible to make much sense of, and maddeningly, as usual, Homes would not explain them. Aside from indolence, which I've mentioned, a bigger fault was his intense dislike of discussing a case before he was completely certain his solution was correct. I can't believe a man of his intelligence, a true genius, beyond question, could be so fearful of any doubts or criticism.

But finally, to my great relief, came the day he sat me down and made all clear.

"Shelton," he began, "was a man of sixty, in rugged good health, and a bit of a scoundrel. He was known to cheat military pensioners by buying for far less than they were worth such really valuable medals as those from Trafalgar and Waterloo. Obviously, he had enemies, but it's unlikely any bad enough to kill him. On the other hand, he was quite wealthy, with an estate of close to a million pounds. His only heir is a nephew, Donald Mills, aged thirty-five, and no angel himself. He's a fanatic gambler and ne'er-do-well, forever losing money on horses, cards, billiards, and anything else on which a bet can be made. Always short of funds, one may presume he would not cry should his uncle perish. Somehow, he managed to keep his character flaws from Shelton, perhaps because the older man was too busy fleecing others.

On learning all this from my Irregulars, I immediately decided Mills was almost certainly the killer, but had no idea how the deed was done, and still have none, except for a vague suspicion after hearing how the office was furnished. For that, my dear friend, since I've been remiss in keeping you informed—but you're used to that, mea culpa!—I suggest you join me in examining the fatal room. The game is afoot, Sun Wat, so let us get to it!"

Fortunately for us, the beefy constable on duty at Shelton's office door recognized Homes, and so let us enter, although with obvious reluctance. We understood why when we found Inspector Gerard, his craggy face dark, seated glumly on the edge of the desk. He greeted us with only a curt nod, quite different from his normal geniality.

"Damme, gentlemen," he said angrily, "it ain't possible. The assistants heard a shot fired, but when they charged in, nobody was here, and we're four storeys high up a sheer wall." He paused

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and added almost plaintively, "But a bullet through the window from that there flat across the court, the only place for a sniper, couldn't hit Mr. Shelton where it did. I'm totally flummoxed by this blasted case, Mr. Homes."

"You're right about the shot," Homes said quietly, "unless—" He broke off, and began to survey the walls, which were truly breathtaking, covered as they were with hundreds of medals, medallions, and plaques, most brass or steel, but some apparently gold and silver. Having pulled out his magnifying glass, my friend, seeming as he often does in such circumstances like a blooded hound on the hunt, went from one display to another, not in order, but in a random way, or so I thought.

Then, after several quick scrutinies, he gave a sharp little exclamation and said, "Look at this, Inspector." Gerard hastened to join him. "See that?" my friend said. "The tiny bright dent in the center of this bronze medallion?" Before either of us could comply, he was examining a second spot some feet away. He seemed to know exactly where to find the mysterious marks. Gerard looked confused, as I was myself.

He said brusquely, "I know how you make up theories, Mr. Homes, and I can't deny you've been right at times, but now you ain't making any sense to me. What the devil do these medals have to do with the shooting?"

"I can't blame you," my friend said in high good humor. "What neither of you knows is that Mills is truly a wizard at billiards. He never loses, making one amazing shot after another involving very complicated multiple banks."

"Homes!" I exclaimed. "You mean—?" But without answering, he squeezed behind the desk to point out a large plaque next to the window frame. "This is it, I'll swear, the very surface from which the ball bearing, after five ricochets, struck Shelton's head. An award, I see, for saving life at sea; ironical—now it brings death. Mills is a true genius at geometry with an eye worthy of Euclid or the great Felix Klein. I unhesitatingly predict, Inspector, that if you search Mills's flat you'll find some kind of smoothbore gun, maybe a blunderbuss or even a shotgun. With a suitable load of black powder, a steel ball would have more than enough energy to do the job. I presume Mills had many chances to study the office and the displays so that he could mentally prepare a correct trajectory, which he had the skill to implement."

He was right again. Gerard found not only a shotgun, but several spare bearings, and under his relentless questioning, Donald Mills confessed.

Too bad that Homes celebrated by composing and playing on his cursed fiddle a solo piece he called "A Ballade for Billiards in A minor." Not a melody in it! ●

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BY TERENCE FAHERTY

And If He Sees His Shadow
BY JEREMIAH HEALY

His Deadliest Enemy
BY KATE WILHELM

Valentino's Valediction
BY AMY MYERS

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ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

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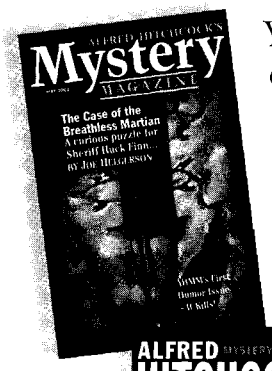

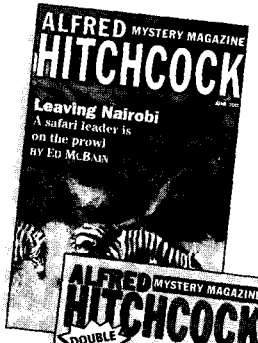

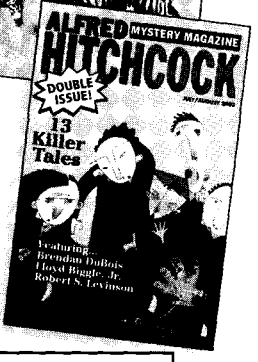

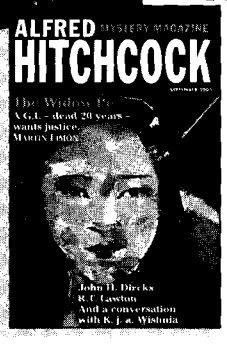

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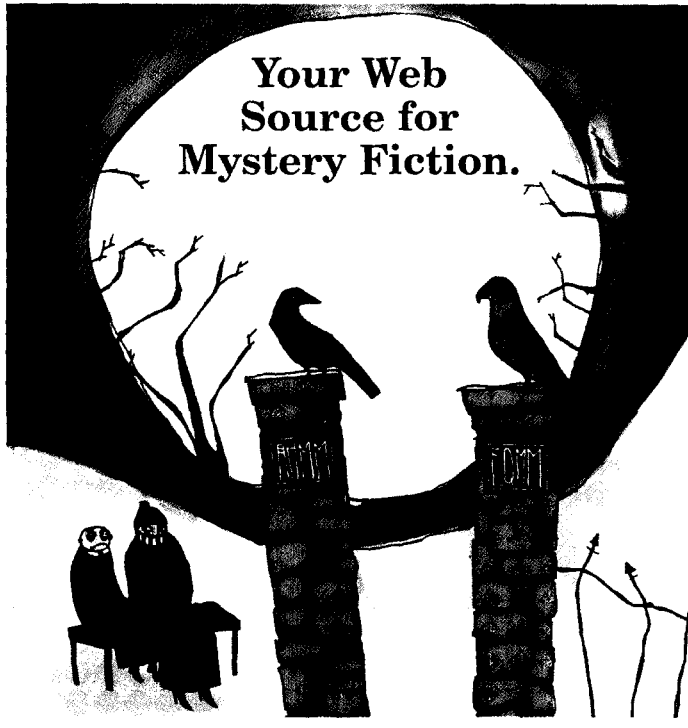

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